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BUNCH GRASS

A CHRONICLE OF
LIFE ON A CATTLE RANCH

BY

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

AUTHOR OF "BROTHERS" "THE HILL" ETC. ETC.

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TO

MY BROTHER

ARTHUR HONYWOOD VACHELL

I DEDICATE

THIS BOOK

FOREWORD

THE author of *Bunch Grass* ventures to hope that this book will not be altogether regarded as mere flotsam and jetsam of English and American magazines. The stories, it will be found, have a certain continuity, and may challenge interest as apart from incident because an attempt has been made to reproduce atmosphere, the atmosphere of a country that has changed almost beyond recognition in three decades. The author went to a wild California cow-country just thirty years ago, and remained there seventeen years, during which period the land from such pastoral uses as cattle and sheep-raising became subdivided into innumerable small holdings. He beheld a new country in the making, and the passing of the pioneer who settled vital differences with a pistol. During those years some noted outlaws ranged at large in the county here spoken of as San Lorenzo. The Dalton gang of train robbers lived and died (some with their boots on) not far from the village entitled Paradise. Stage coaches were robbed frequently. Every large rancher suffered much at the hands of cattle and horse thieves. The writer has talked to Frank James, the most famous of Western desperados; he has enjoyed the acquaintance of Judge Lynch, who hanged two men from a bridge within half-a-mile of the ranch-house; he remembers the Chinese Riots; he has witnessed many a fight between the hungry squatter and the old settler with no title to the leagues over which his herds roamed, and so, in a modest way, he may claim to be a historian, not forgetting that the original signification of the word was a narrator of fables founded upon facts.

Apologies are tendered for the dialect to be found in these pages. There is no Californian dialect. At the time of the discovery of gold, the state was flooded with men from all parts of the world, and dialects became inextricably mixed. Not even Bret Harte was able to reproduce the talk of children whose fathers may have come from Kentucky or Massachusetts, and their mothers from Louisiana.

Re-reading these chapters, with a more or less critical detachment, and leaving them—good, bad and indifferent—as they were originally printed, one is forced to the conclusion that sentiment—which would seem to arouse what is most hostile in the cultivated dweller in cities—is an all-pervading essence in primitive communities, colouring and discolouring every phase of life and thought. One instance among a thousand will suffice. Stage coaches, in the writer's county, used to be held up, single-handed, by a highwayman, known as Black Bart. All the foothill folk pleaded in extenuation of the robber that he wrote a copy of verses, embalming his adventure, which he used to pin to the nearest tree. Black Bart would have been shot on sight had he presented his doggerel to any self-respecting Western editor; nevertheless the sentiment that inspired a bandit to set forth his misdeeds in execrable rhyme transformed him from a criminal into a popular hero! The virtues that counted in the foothills during the eighties were generosity, courage, and that amazing power of recuperation which enables a man to begin life again and again, undaunted by the bludgeonings of misfortune. Some of the stories in this volume are obviously the work of an apprentice, but they have been included because, however faulty in technique, they do serve to illustrate a past that can never come back, and men and women who were outwardly crude and illiterate but at core kind and chivalrous, and nearly always humorously unconventional. The bunch grass, so beloved by the patriarchal pioneers, has been ploughed up and destroyed ; the unwritten law of Judge Lynch will soon become an oral tradition ; but the Land of Yesterday blooms afresh as the Golden State of To-day—and To-morrow.

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BUNCH GRASS

I

ALETHEA-BELLE

In the early eighties, when my brother Ajax and I were raising cattle in the foothills of Southern California, our ranch-house was used as a stopping-place by the teamsters hauling freight across the Coast Range; and after the boom began, while the village of Paradise was evolving itself out of rough timber, we were obliged to furnish all comers with board and lodging. Hardly a day passed without some "prairie schooner" (the canvas-covered wagon of the squatter) creaking into our corral; and the quiet gulches and cañons where Ajax and I had shot quail and deer began to re-echo to the shouts of the children of the rough folk from the mid-West and Missouri. These "Pikers," so called, settled thickly upon the sage-brush hills to the south and east of us, and took up all the land they could claim from the Government. Before spring was over, we were asked to lend an old *adobe* building to the village fathers, to be used as a schoolhouse, until the schoolhouse proper was built. At that time a New England family of the name of Spafford was working for us. Mrs. Spafford, having two children of her own, tried to enlist our sympathies.

"I'm kinder sick," she told us, "of cookin' an' teachin'; an' the hot weather's comin' on, too. You'd oughter let 'em hev that old *adobe*."

"But who will teach the children?" we asked.

"We've fixed that," said Mrs. Spafford. "'Tain't everyone as 'd want to come into this wilderness, but my auntie's cousin, Alethea-Belle Buchanan, is willin' to take the job."

"Is she able?" we asked doubtfully.

"She's her father's daughter," Mrs. Spafford replied. "Abram Buchanan was as fine an' brave a man as ever preached the Gospel. An' clever, too. My sakes, he never done but one foolish thing, and that was when he merried his wife."

"Tell us about her," said that inveterate gossip, Ajax.

Mrs. Spafford sniffed.

"I seen her once—that was once too much fer me. One o' them lackadaisical, wear-a-wrapper-in-the-mornin', soft, pulpy Southerners. Pretty—yes, in a spindlin', pink an' white soon-washed-out pattern, but without backbone. I've no patience with sech."

"Her daughter won't be able to halter-break these wild colts."

"Didn't I say that Alethea-Belle took after her father? She must hev consid'able snap an' nerve, fer she's put in the last year, sence Abram died, sellin' books in this State."

"A book agent?"

"Yes, sir, a book agent."

If Mrs. Spafford had said road agent, which means highwayman in California, we could not have been more surprised. A successful book agent must have the hide of a rhinoceros, the guile of a serpent, the obstinacy of a mule, and the persuasive notes of a nightingale.

"If Miss Buchanan has been a book agent, she'll do," said Ajax.

. . . .

She arrived at Paradise on the ramshackle old stage-coach late one Saturday afternoon. Ajax and I carried her small hair-trunk into the ranch-house ; Mrs. Spafford received her. We retreated to the corrals.

" She'll never, never do," said Ajax.

" Never," said I.

Alethea-Belle Buchanan looked about eighteen ; and her face was white as the dust that lay thick upon her grey linen cloak. Under the cloak we had caught a glimpse of a thin, slab-chested figure. She wore thread gloves, and said " I thank you " in a prim, New England accent.

" Depend upon it, she's had pie for breakfast ever since she was born," said Ajax, " and it's not agreed with her. She'll keep a foothill school in order just about two minutes—and no longer ! "

At supper, however, she surprised us. She was very plain-featured, but the men—the rough teamsters, for instance—could not keep their eyes off her. She was the most amazing mixture of boldness and timidity I had ever met. We were about to plump ourselves down at table, for instance, when Miss Buchanan, folding her hands and raising her eyes, said grace ; but to our first questions she replied, blushing, in timid monosyllables.

After supper, Mrs. Spafford and she washed up. Later, they brought their sewing into the sitting-room. While we were trying to thaw the little schoolmarm's shyness, a mouse ran across the floor. In an instant Miss Buchanan was on her chair. The mouse ran round the room and vanished ; the girl who had been sent to Paradise to keep in order the turbulent children of the foothills stepped down from her chair.

" I'm scared to death of mice," she confessed.

My brother Ajax scowled.

" Fancy sending that whey-faced little coward —here ! " he whispered to me.

" Have you taught school before ? " I asked.

"Oh yes, indeed," she answered; "and I know something of your foothill folks. I've been a book agent. Oh, indeed? You know that. Well, I did first-rate, but that was the book, which sold itself—a beautiful book. Maybe you know it—*The Milk of Human Kindness*? When we're better acquainted, I'd like to read you," she looked hard at Ajax, "some o' my favourite passages."

"Thanks," said Ajax stiffly.

Next day was Sunday. At breakfast the schoolmarm asked Ajax if there was likely to be a prayer-meeting.

"A prayer-meeting, Miss Buchanan?"

"It's the Sabbath, you know."

"Yes—er—so it is. Well, you see," he smiled feebly, "the cathedral isn't built yet."

"Why, what's the matter with the schoolhouse? I presume you're all church-members?"

Her grey eyes examined each of us in turn, and each made confession. One of the teamsters was a Baptist; another a Latter-Day Adventist; the Spaffords were Presbyterians; we, of course, belonged to the Church of England.

"We ought to have a prayer-meeting," said the little schoolmarm.

"Yes; we did oughter," assented Mrs. Spafford.

"I kin pray first-rate when I git started," said the Baptist teamster.

The prayer-meeting took place. Afterwards Ajax said to me—

"She's very small, is Whey-face, but somehow she seemed to fill the *adobe*."

In the afternoon we had an adventure which gave us further insight into the character and temperament of the new schoolmarm.

We all walked to Paradise across the home pasture, for Miss Buchanan was anxious to inspect the site—there was nothing else then—of the proposed schoolhouse. Her childlike simplicity and assurance in taking for granted that she would eventually occupy that unbuilt academy struck us as pathetic.

"I give her one week," said Ajax, "not a day more."

Coming back we called a halt under some willows near the creek. The shade invited us to sit down.

"Are there snakes—rattlesnakes?" Miss Buchanan asked nervously.

"In the brush-hills—yes; here—no," replied my brother.

By a singular coincidence, the words were hardly out of his mouth when we heard the familiar warning, the whirring, never-to-be-forgotten sound of the beast known to the Indians as "death in the grass."

"Mercy!" exclaimed the schoolmarm, staring wildly about her. It is not easy to localise the exact position of a coiled rattlesnake by the sound of his rattle.

"Don't move!" said Ajax. "Ah, I see him! There he is! I must find a stick."

The snake was coiled some half-dozen yards from us. Upon the top coil was poised his hideous head; above it vibrated the bony, fleshless vertebræ of the tail. The little schoolmarm stared at the beast, fascinated by fear and horror. Ajax cut a switch from a willow; then he advanced.

"Oh!" entreated Miss Buchanan, "please don't go so near."

"There's no danger," said Ajax. "I've never been able to understand why rattlers inspire such terror. They can't strike except at objects within half their length, and one little tap, as you will see, breaks their backbone. Now watch! I'm going to provoke this chap to strike; and then I shall kill him."

He held the end of the stick about eighteen inches from the glaring, lidless eyes. With incredible speed the poised head shot forth. Ajax laughed. The snake was recoiling, as he struck it on the neck. Instantly it writhed impotently. My brother set the heel of his heavy boot upon the skull, crushing it into the ground.

" Now let's sit down," said he.

" Hark ! " said the little schoolmarm.

Another snake was rattling within a yard or two of the first.

" It's the mate," said I. " At this time of year they run in pairs. We ought to have thought of that."

" I'll have him in a jiffy," said my brother.

As he spoke I happened to be watching the schoolmarm. Her face was painfully white, but her eyes were shining, and her lips set above a small, resolute chin.

" Let me kill him," she said, in a low voice.

" You, Miss Buchanan ? "

" Yes."

" It's easy enough, but one mustn't—er—miss."

" I shan't miss."

She took the willow stick from my brother's hand. Every movement of his she reproduced exactly, even to the setting of her heel upon the serpent's head. Then she smiled at us apologetically.

" I hated to do it. I was scared to death, but I wanted to conquer that cowardly Belle. It's just as you say, they're killed mighty easy. If we could kill the Old Serpent as easy——" she sighed, not finishing the sentence.

Ajax, who has a trick of saying what others think, blurted out—

" What do you mean by conquering—Belle ? "

We sat down.

" My name is Alethea-Belle, a double name.

Father wanted to call me Alethea ; but mother fancied Belle. Father, you know, was a Massachusetts minister ; mother came from way down south. She died when I was a child. She—she was not very strong, poor mother, but father," she spoke proudly, " father was the best man that ever lived."

All her self-consciousness had vanished. Somehow we felt that the daughter of the New England parson was speaking, not the child of the invertebrate Southerner.

" I had to take to selling books," she continued, speaking more to herself than to us, " because of Belle. That miserable girl got into debt. Father left her a little money. Belle squandered it sinfully on clothes and pleasure. She'd a rose silk dress——"

" A rose silk dress ? " repeated Ajax.

" It was just too lovely—that dress," said the little schoolmarm, reflectively.

" Even Alethea could not resist it," said I.

She blushed, and her shyness, her awkwardness, returned.

" Alethea had to pay for it," she replied primly. " I ask your pardon for speaking so foolishly and improperly of—myself."

After this, behind her back, Ajax and I invariably called her Alethea-Belle.

. . . .

School began at nine sharp the next morning. We expected a large attendance, and were not disappointed. Some of the boys grinned broadly when Alethea-Belle appeared carrying books and maps. She looked absurdly small, very nervous, and painfully frail. The fathers present exchanged significant glances ; the mothers sniffed. Alethea-Belle entered the names of her scholars in a neat ledger, and shook hands with each. Then she made a short speech.

" Friends," she said, " I'm glad to make your acquaintance. I shall expect my big boys and girls to set an example to the little ones by being punctual, clean, and obedient. We will now begin our exercises with prayer and a hymn. After that the parents will please retire."

That evening Alethea-Belle went early to bed with a raging headache. Next morning she appeared whiter than ever, but her eyelids were red. However, she seemed self-possessed and even cheerful. Riding together across the range, Ajax said to me: "Alethea-Belle is scared out of her life."

" You mean Belle. Alethea is as brave as her father was before her."

" You're right. Poor little Belle! Perhaps we'd better find some job or other round the *adobe* this afternoon. There'll be ructions."

But the ructions did not take place that day. It seems that Alethea-Belle told her scholars she was suffering severely from headache. She begged them politely to be as quiet as possible. Perhaps amazement constrained obedience.

" These foothill imps will kill her," said Ajax.

Within a week we knew that the big boys were becoming unmanageable, but no such information leaked from Alethea-Belle's lips. Each evening at supper we asked how she had fared during the day. Always she replied primly: " I thank you; I'm getting along nicely, better than I expected."

Mrs. Spafford, a peeper through doors and keyholes, explained the schoolmarm's methods.

" I jest happened to be passin' by," she told me, " and I peeked in through—through the winder. That great big hoodlum of a George Spragg was a-sassin' Miss Buchanan an' makin' faces at her. The crowd was a-whoopin' him up. In the middle o' the uproar she kneels down. ' O Lord,' says she, ' I pray Thee to soften the heart of pore

George Spragg, and give me, a weak woman, the strength to prevail against his everlastin' ignorance and foolishness!' George got the colour of a beet, but he quit his foolin'. Yes sir, she prays for 'em, and she coaxes 'em, an' she never knows when she's beat; but they'll be too much for her. She's losin' her appetite, an' she don't sleep good. We won't be boardin' her much longer."

But that night, as usual, when I asked Alethea-Belle how she did, she replied, in her prim, formal accents: "I'm doing real well, I thank you; much, much better than I expected."

Two days later I detected a bruise upon her forehead. With great difficulty I extracted the truth. Tom Eubanks had thrown an apple at the schoolmarm.

"And what did you do?"

Her grey eyes were unruffled, her delicately cut lips never smiled, as she replied austerely: "I told Thomas that I was sure he meant well, but that if a boy wished to give an apple to a lady he'd ought to hand it politely, and not throw it. Then I ate the apple. It was a Newtown pippin, and real good. After recess Thomas apologised."

"What did the brute say?"

"He is not a brute. He said he was sorry he'd thrown the pippin so hard."

Next day I happened to meet Tom Eubanks. He had a basket of Newtown pippins for the schoolmarm. He was very red when he told me that Miss Buchanan liked—apples. Apples at that time did not grow in the brush-hills. Tom had bought them at the village store.

. . . .

But Alethea-Belle grew thinner and whiter.

Just before the end of the term the climax came. I happened to find the little schoolmarm crying bitterly in a clump of sage-brush near the water-troughs.

"It's like this," she confessed presently: "I can't rid myself of that weak, hateful Belle. She's going to lie down soon, and let the boys trample on her; then she'll have to quit. And Alethea sees the Promised Land. Oh, oh! I do despise the worst half of myself!"

"The sooner you leave these young devils the better."

"What do you say?"

She confronted me with flashing eyes. I swear that she looked beautiful. The angularities, the lack of colour, the thin chest, the stooping back were effaced. I could not see them, because—well, because I was looking through them, far beyond them, at something else.

"I love my boys, my foothill boys; and if they are rough, brutal at times, they're strong." Her emphasis on the word was pathetic. "They're strong, and they're young, and they're poised for flight—now. To me, me, has been given the opportunity to direct that flight—upward, and if I fail them, if I quit——" She trembled violently.

"You won't quit," said I, with conviction.

"To-morrow," said she, "they've fixed things for a real battle."

She refused obstinately to tell me more, and obtained a solemn promise from me that I would not interfere.

. . . .

Afterwards I got most of the facts out of George Spragg. Three of the biggest boys had planned rank mutiny. Doubtless they resented a compulsory attendance at school, and with short-sighted policy made certain that if they got rid of Alethea-Belle the schoolhouse would be closed for ever. And what chance could she have—one frail girl against three burly young giants?

A full attendance warned her that her scholars expected something interesting to happen. Boys and girls filed into the schoolroom quietly enough, and the proceedings opened with prayer, but not the usual prayer. Alethea-Belle prayed fervently that right might prevail against might, now, and for ever. Amen.

Within a minute the three mutineers had marched into the middle of the room. In loud, ear-piercing notes they began to sing "Pull for the Shore." The girls giggled nervously; the boys grinned; several opened their mouths to sing, but closed them again as Alethea-Belle descended from the rostrum and approached the rebels. The smallest child knew that a fight to a finish had begun.

The schoolmarm raised her thin hand and her thin voice. No attention was paid to either. Then she walked swiftly to the door and locked it. The old *adobe* had been built at a time when Indian raids were common in Southern California. The door was of oak, very massive; the windows, narrow openings in the thick walls, were heavily barred. The children wondered what was about to happen. The three rebels sang with a louder, more defiant note as Alethea-Belle walked past them and on to the rostrum. Upon her desk stood a covered basket. Taking this in her hand, she came back to the middle of the room. The boys eyed her movements curiously. She carried, besides the basket, a cane. Then she bent down and placed the basket between herself and the boys. They still sang "Pull for the Shore," but faintly, feebly. They stared hard at the basket and the cane. Alethea-Belle stood back, with a curious expression upon her white face; very swiftly she flicked open the lid of the basket. Silence fell on the scholars.

Out of the basket, quite slowly and stealthily, came the head of a snake, a snake well known to the smallest child—known and dreaded. The flat head, the lidless, baleful eyes, the grey-green, diamond-barred skin of the neck were unmistakable.

"It's a rattler!" shrieked one of the rebels.

They sprang back; the other children rose, panic-stricken. The schoolmarm spoke very quietly—

"Don't move! The snake will not hurt any of you."

As she spoke she flicked again the lid of the basket. It fell on the head of the serpent. Alethea-Belle touched the horror, which withdrew. Then she picked up the basket, secured the lid, and spoke to the huddled-up, terrified crowd—

"You tried to scare me, didn't you, and I have scared you." She laughed pleasantly, but with a faint inflection of derision, as if she knew, as she did, that the uncivilised children of the foothills, like their fathers, fear nothing on earth so much as rattlers and—ridicule. After a moment she continued: "I brought this here to-day as an object-lesson. You loathe and fear the serpent in this basket, as I loathe and fear the serpent which is in you." She caught the eyes of the mutineers and held them. "And," her eyes shone, "I believe that I have been sent to kill the evil in you, as I am going to kill this venomous beast. Stand back!"

They shrank back against the walls, open-eyed, open-mouthed, trembling. Alethea-Belle unfastened for the second time the lid of the basket; once more the flat head protruded, hissing. Alethea-Belle struck sharply.

"It is harmless now," she said quietly; "its back is broken."

But the snake still writhed. Alethea-Belle shuddered; then she set her heel firmly upon the head.

"And now"—her voice was weak and quavering, but a note of triumph, of mastery, informed it—"and now I am going to cane you three boys;

I am going to try to break your stubborn wills; but you are big and strong, and you must let me do it. If you don't let me do it, you will break my heart, for if I am too weak to command here, I must resign. Oh, I wish that I were strong!"

The mutineers stared at each other, at the small white face confronting them, at the boys and girls about them. It was a great moment in their lives, an imperishable experience. The biggest spoke first, sheepishly, roughly, almost defiantly—

"Come on up, boys; we'll hev to take a lickin' this time."

Alethea-Belle went back to the rostrum, trembling. She had never caned a boy before, and she loathed violence. And yet she gave those three lads a sound thrashing. When the last stroke was given, she tottered and fell back upon her chair—senseless.

. . . .

Later, I asked her how she had caught the snake.

"After you left me," she said, "I sat down to think. I knew that the boys wanted to scare me, and it struck me what a splendid thing 'twould be to scare them. Just then I saw the snake asleep on the rocks; and I remembered what one o' the cowboys had said about their being stupid and sluggish at this time o' year. But my! when it came to catching it alive—I—nearly had a fit. I'd chills and fever before I was able to brace up. Well, sir, I got me a long stick, and I fixed a noose at the end of it; and somehow—with the Lord's help—I got the creature into my work-basket; and I carried it home, and put it under my bed, with a big stone atop o' the lid. But I never slept a wink. I'm teetotal, but I know now what it is to have the—the——"

"Jim-jams," said I.

"I believe that's what they call it in California. Yes, I saw snakes, rattlers, everywhere!"

"You're the pluckiest little woman in the world," said I.

"Oh no! I'm a miserable coward, and always will be. Now it's over I kind of wish I hadn't scared the little children quite so bad."

About a month later, when Alethea-Belle was leaving us and about to take up new quarters in Paradise, near the just finished village schoolhouse, Mrs. Spafford came to me. The schoolmarm, it seemed, had stepped off our scales. She had gained nearly ten pounds since the day of the great victory.

"Your good cooking, Mrs. Spafford——"

Mrs. Spafford smiled scornfully.

"Did my good cooking help her any afore she whacked them boys? Not much. No, sir, her scholars hev put the flesh on to her pore bones; and I give them the credit. They air tryin' to pay for what their schoolmarm's put into their heads and hearts."

"Miss Buchanan has taught us a thing or two," I suggested.

"Yes," Mrs. Spafford replied solemnly, "she hev."

II

THE DUMBLES

LOOKING back, I am quite sure that John Jacob Dumble's chief claim to the confidence of our community—a confidence invariably abused—was the fact that the rascal's family were such " nice folks," " so well-raised," so clean, so respectable, such constant and punctual " church-members." After the Presbyterian Church was built in Paradise, no more edifying spectacle could be seen than the arrival on Sunday mornings of the Dumble family in their roomy spring wagon. The old man—he was not more than fifty-five—had two pretty daughters and a handsome son. Mrs. Dumble, a comely woman, always wore grey clothes and grey thread gloves. She had a pale, too impassive face, and her dark hair, tightly drawn back from her brows, had curious white streaks in it. Ajax said a thousand times that he should not sleep soundly until he had determined whether or not Mrs. Dumble was a party to her husband's misdemeanours. My brother's imagination, as I have said before, runs riot at times. He was of opinion that the wearing of grey indicated a character originally white, but discoloured by her husband's dirty little tricks. Certainly Mrs. Dumble was a woman of silence, secretive, with lips tightly compressed, as if—as Ajax remarked—she feared that some of John Jacob's peccadilloes might escape from them.

The father was inordinately proud of his son, Quincey, who in many respects took after the mother. He, too, was quiet, self-possessed, and somewhat pale. He worked for us and other cattlemen, not for his father, and after the lad left school Ajax fell to speculating about him, as he speculated about the mother.

"Is Quincey on to the old man's games?" he would ask.

It must be recorded that John Jacob was very careful to keep within the limits of the law, but he ploughed close to the line, where the soil, as we all know, is richest and, comparatively speaking, virgin. But no man in the county was louder than he in denouncing such crimes as horse-stealing or cattle-lifting, crimes in those days disgracefully common. He might ear-mark a wandering piglet, for instance, or clap his iron upon an unbranded yearling; but who could swear that these estrays were not the lawful property of him upon whose land they were found?

At that time Ajax and I were breeding Cleveland Bays, and amongst our colts we had two very promising animals likely to make a match team, and already prize-winners at the annual county fair. One day in October, Uncle Jake, our head vaquero, reported the colts to be missing out of our back pasture. Careful examination revealed the cutting of the fence. Obviously the colts had been stolen.

Ajax suggested that we should employ old man Dumble to help us to recover the stolen property. He was shrewd and persevering, and he knew every man, woman, and child within a radius of fifty miles.

"Why, boys," said he, when we asked him to undertake the job, "I'd do more than this to help friends and neighbours. It's a dooty to hunt down these scallywags, a dooty, yas—and a pleasure."

We took the trail that night. The thief, so far as we could conjecture, had about twenty hours start, but then he would be obliged to travel by night and by devious mountain-paths. According to old Dumble, his objective would be Bakersfield, and to reach Bakersfield some dry plains must be traversed. At the watering-places upon these plains we might expect to hear from sheep-herders and vaqueros some information respecting animals so handsome and so peculiarly marked as our colts.

And so it proved. At a dismal saloon, where water was nearly as expensive and quite as bad as the whisky, we learned that a bright bay colt with a white star and stocking, and another with a white nose, had been seen early that morning. Old man Dumble gleaned more.

"We're dealing with a tenderfoot and a stranger to the saloon-keeper," he said, as we struck into the sage-brush wilderness. "The fool didn't know enough to spend a few dollars at the bar. He called for one lemonade."

"Well," said Ajax, "you are teetotal yourself; you ought to respect a man who calls for lemonade."

"I ain't a thief," said our neighbour. "If I was," he added, "I reckon I'd cover my tracks around saloons with a leetle whisky. Boys, there's another thing. This feller we're after is ridin' too fast. Them colts won't stand it. Young things must feed an' rest. The saloon-keeper allowed they were footsore a'ready, and kinder petered out. We must keep our eyes skinned."

"You're a wonder," said Ajax. "How you divined that the thief would travel this trail beats me."

"Wal," said old man Dumble, "it's this way. There's a big dealer comes three times a year to Bakersfield; he pays good money for good stuff—an' he asks no questions. I happened to hear he was a-comin' down only las' Sunday."

Something in his voice, some sly gleam in his eye, aroused my suspicions. As soon as we happened to be alone, I whispered to my brother: "I say, what if the old man is playing hare and hound with us?"

"Pooh!" said Ajax. "He's keen as mustard to collar this thief—the keener, possibly, since he discovered that the fellow is a tenderfoot. I've sized him up about right. He wants to establish a record. It's like this teetotal business of his. The people here refuse to believe evil of a man who drinks water, goes to church, and catches horse-thieves. I'll add one word more. To give the old fraud his due, he really holds in abhorrence any crime that might land him in the State penitentiary. Hullo! There's a faint reek out yonder. I'll take a squint through my glasses."

We called a halt. We were now on the alkaline plains beyond the San Emigdio mountains. Riding all through the night, we had changed horses at a ranch where we were known. Ajax stared through his binoculars.

"What we're after," said he quietly, "is in sight."

He handed his glasses to me. I could barely make out a horseman, herding along two animals. The plains were blazing with heat. In the distance a soft blue haze obscured the horizon; faintly outlined against this were three spirals of what seemed to be white smoke: three moving pillars of alkaline dust.

"He can't git away from us," said old man Dumble.

Looking at him, my suspicions took flight. He was, as Ajax said, keener than we to arrest the thief. His small eyes sparkled with excitement; his right index-finger was crooked, as if itching for the trigger; his lips moved. In fancy he was rehearsing the "Stand and deliver" of an officer of the law!

"We kin ride him down," he muttered.

"Yes," said Ajax.

We looked to our girths and our pistols. It was unlikely that the thief would show fight, but—he might. Then we mounted, and galloped ahead.

"Forrard—for-r-rard!" shouted Ajax.

Within a few minutes, a quarter of an hour at most, the man we were hunting would see us; then the chase would really begin. He would abandon the footsore colts, and make for the hills. And so it came to pass. Presently, we saw the horseman turn off at right angles; the jaded colts hesitated, trotted a few yards, and stood still. A faint neigh floated down wind.

"Doggone it!" exclaimed old man Dumble, "his horse is fresh. He's got friends in the hills."

We had left the trail, and were pounding over the sage-brush desert. I could smell the sage, strongly pungent, and the alkaline dust began to irritate my throat; the sun, if one stood still, was strong enough to blister the skin of the hands.

For three-quarters of an hour it seemed to me that the distance between us and our quarry remained constant; but Dumble said we were falling behind. The thief was lighter than any of us, and his horse was evidently a stayer. The hills rose out of the haze, bleak and bare, seamed with gulches, a safe sanctuary for all wild things.

"If the cuss was within range, I'd try a shot," said the old man.

"I'd like to make out who he is," said Ajax.

Suddenly the horse of the thief fell. We discovered later that the beast had plunged into a piece of ground honeycombed with squirrel-holes. The man staggered to his feet; the horse struggled where he fell, but did not rise. His shoulder was broken.

"We have him!" yelled Dumble.

"Yes; we have him," repeated my brother. "Suppose we take a look at him?"

The thief had abandoned all idea of escape. He stood beside his horse, waiting for us; but at the distance we could not determine whether he intended to surrender quietly or to fight. Ajax adjusted his glasses, and glanced through them. Then, with an exclamation, he handed them to me.

"Kin ye make him out, boys?" asked our neighbour.

"Yes," said I, giving back the glasses to Ajax. He handed them in silence to old man Dumble. Then, instinctively, both our right hands went to our belts. We were not quite sure what a father might do.

He did what should have been expected—and avoided. He dropped the binoculars. Then he turned to us, trembling, livid—a scarecrow of the man we knew.

"It's my boy," he said hoarsely. "And I thought he was the best boy in the county. Oh God!"

A minute may have passed, not more. One guesses that in that brief time the unhappy father saw clearly the inevitable consequences of his own roguery and sharp practice. He had sowed, broadcast, innumerable, nameless little frauds; he reaped a big crime. I looked across those dreary alkaline plains and out of the lovely blue haze beyond I seemed to see the Dumbles' spring wagon rolling to church. Mrs. Dumble's pale, impassive face was turned to the bleak plains. At last I read her aright, that quiet woman of silence. She knew the father of her children from the outer rind to the inmost core. I thought of the pretty daughters, who did not know. And out yonder stood the son.

Ajax beckoned me aside. We whispered together for a moment or two. Then my brother spoke—

"We're going to lead home our colts," he said curtly; "and you can lead home yours. We shall take better care of ours after this experience. They won't be allowed to run wild in the back pasture."

"Boys—Quincey an' me——"

"Shush-h-h!" said Ajax. "That fellow out there is a long way off. I could not swear in a court of law that he is the person we take him to be. Whom he looks like we know, who he is we don't know, and we don't wish to know. So long."

We rode back to our colts.

III

PAP SPOONER

Pap Spooner was about sixty-five years old, and the greatest miser in San Lorenzo County. He lived on less than a dollar a day, and allowed the rest of his income to accumulate at the rate of one per cent. a month, compound interest.

When Ajax and I first made his acquaintance he was digging post-holes. The day, a day in September, was uncommonly hot. I said, indiscreetly: " Mr. Spooner, why do you dig post-holes ? "

With a queer glint in his small, dull grey eyes he replied, curtly : " Why are you boys a-shootin' quail—hey ? 'Cause ye like to, I reckon. Fer the same reason I like ter dig post-holes. It's jest recreation—to me."

When we were out of earshot Ajax laughed.

" Recreation ! " said my brother. " Nothing will ever recreate him. Of all the pinchers——"

" Shush-h-h ! " said I. " It's too hot."

Our neighbours told many stories of Pap Spooner. Even that bland old fraud, John Jacob Dumble, admitted sorrowfully that he was no match for Pap in a horse, cattle, or pig deal ; and George Leadham, the blacksmith, swore that Pap would steal milk from a blind kitten. The humorists of the village were of opinion that Heaven had helped Pap because he had helped himself so freely out of other folks' piles.

In appearance Andrew Spooner was small,

thin, and wiry, with the beak of a turkey-buzzard, the complexion of an Indian, and a set of large, white, very ill-fitting false teeth, which clicked like castanets whenever the old man was excited.

Now, in California, " Pap " is a *nom de caresse* for father. But, so far as we knew, Pap had no children; accordingly we jumped to the conclusion that Andrew Spooner got his nickname from a community who had rechristened the tallest man in our village " Shorty " and the ugliest " Beaut." The humorists knew that Pap might have been the father of the foothills, the George Washington of Paradise, but he wasn't.

Later we learned that Pap had buried a wife and child. And the child, it seems, had called him " Pap." We made the inevitable deduction that such paternal instincts as may have bloomed long ago in the miser's heart were laid in a small grave in the San Lorenzo Cemetery. Our little schoolmarm, Alethea-Belle Buchanan, said (without any reason) : " I reckon Mr. Spooner must have thought the world of his little one." Whereupon Ajax replied gruffly that as much could be said, doubtless, of a—vulture.

The word " vulture " happened to be pat, apart from the shape of Andrew Spooner's nose, because we were in the middle of the terrible spring which succeeded the dry year. Even now one does not care to talk about that time of drought. During the previous twelve months the relentless sun had destroyed nearly every living thing, vegetable and animal, in our county. Then, in the late fall and early winter, we had sufficient rain to start the feed on our ranges and hope in our hearts. But throughout February and March not a drop of water fell! Hills and plains lay beneath bright blue skies, into which we gazed day after day, week after week, looking for the cloud that never came. The thin blades of wheat and barley were already frizzling; the tender leaves of the orchards and vineyards turned a sickly yellow; the few cattle and horses which had survived began to fall down and die by the empty creeks and springs. And two dry years in succession meant black ruin for all of us.

For all of us in the foothills except Pap Spooner. By some mysterious instinct he had divined and made preparations for a long drought. Being rich, with land in other counties, he was able to move his stock to green pastures. We knew that he was storing up the money sucked by the sun out of us. He was foreclosing mortgages, buying half-starved horses and steers for a song, selling hay and straw at fabulous prices. And we were reeling upon the ragged edge of bankruptcy! He, the beast of prey, the vulture, was gorging on our carrion.

Men—gaunt, hollow-eyed men—looked at him as if he were an obscene bird, looked at him with ever-increasing hate, with their fingers itching for the trigger of a gun. Pap had his weakness. He liked to babble of his own cuteness; he liked to sit upon a sugar barrel in the village store and talk of savoury viands, so to speak, and sparkling wines in the presence of fellow-citizens who lacked bread and water, particularly water.

One day, in late March, he came into the store as the sun was setting. In such a village as ours, at such a time, the store becomes the club of the community. Misery, who loves company, spent many hours at the store. There was nothing to do on the range.

Upon this particular afternoon we had listened to a new tale of disaster. Till now, although most of us had lost stock, and many had lost land as well, we had regarded health, the rude health of man living the primal life, as an inalienable possession. Our cattle and horses were dying, but we lived. We learned that diphtheria had entered Paradise.

In those early days, before the antitoxin treatment of the disease, diphtheria in Southern California was the deadliest of plagues. It attacked children for the most part, and swept them away in battalions. I have seen whole families exterminated.

And nothing, then as now, prevails against this scourge save prompt and sustained medical treatment. In Paradise we had neither doctor, nor nurse, nor drugs. San Lorenzo, the nearest town, lay twenty-six miles away.

Pap shambled in, clicking his teeth and grinning.

" Nice evenin'," he observed, taking his seat on his sugar barrel.

" Puffec'ly lovely," replied the man who had brought the evil news. " Everything," he stretched out his lean hand,—" everything smilin' an' gay—an' merry as a marriage bell."

Pap rubbed his talon-like hands together.

" Boys," said he, " I done first-rate this afternoon—I done first-rate. I've made money, a wad of it—and don't you forget it."

" You never allow us to forget it," said Ajax. " We all wish you would," he added pointedly.

" Eh ? "

He stared at my brother. The other men in the store showed their teeth in a sort of pitiful, snarling grin. Each was sensible of a secret pleasure that somebody else had dared to bell the cat.

My brother continued, curtly : " This is not the time nor the place for you to buck about what you've done and whom you've done. Under the present circumstances—you're an old man—what you've left undone ought to be engrossing your attention."

" Meanin' ? "

Pap had glanced furtively from face to face, reading in each rough countenance derision and contempt. The masks which the poor wear in the presence of the rich were off.

"I mean," Ajax replied, savagely—so savagely that the old man recoiled and nearly fell off the barrel—"I mean, Mr. Spooner, that the diphtheria has come to Paradise, and is likely to stay here so long as there is flesh for it to feed on."

"The diptheery ?" exclaimed Pap.

Into his eyes—those dull grey eyes—flitted terror and horror. But Ajax saw nothing but what had festered so long in his own mind.

"Aye—the diphtheria ! You are rich, Mr. Spooner ; you can follow your cattle into a healthier country than this. My advice to you is—Get !"

The old man stared ; then he slid off the barrel and shambled out of the store as little Sissy Leadham entered it. The child looked curiously at Andrew Spooner.

"What's the matter with Pap ?" she asked, shrilly.

She was a pretty, tow-headed, rosy-cheeked creature, the daughter of George Leadham, a widower, who adored her. He was looking at her now with a strange light in his eyes. Not a man in the store but interpreted aright the father's glance.

"What's the matter with pore old Pap ?" she demanded.

The blacksmith caught her up, kissing her face, smoothing her curls.

"Just that, my pet," said he. "He's old, and he's poor — the poorest man, ain't he, boys ?— the very poorest man in Paradise."

The child looked puzzled. It would have taken a wiser head than hers to understand the minds of the men about her.

"I thought old Pap was rich," she faltered.

"He ain't," said the blacksmith, hugging her tight. "He's poorer than all of us poor folks put together."

"Oh, my!" said Sissy, opening her blue eyes. "No wonder he looks as if someone'd hit him with a fence rail. Pore old Pap!" Then she whispered some message, and father and child went out of the store.

We looked at each other. The storekeeper, who had children, blew his nose with unnecessary violence. Ajax said, abruptly: "Boys, I've been a fool. I've driven away the one man who might help us."

"That's all right," the storekeeper growled. "You done first-rate, young man. You tole the ole cuss in plain words what we've bin a-thinkin' fer a coon's age. Help us? Not he!"

Outside, our saddle-horses were hitched to the rail. We had managed to save our horses. Ajax and I rode down the valley, golden with the glory of the setting sun. Beyond, the bleak, brown hills were clothed in an imperial livery of purple. The sky was amber and rose. But Ajax, like Gallio, cared for none of these things. He was cursing his unruly tongue. As we neared the big, empty barn, he turned in his saddle.

"Look here," said he, "we'll nip up to Pap's after supper. I shall ask him to help us. I shall ask for a cheque."

"You expect me to go with you on this tomfool's errand?"

"Certainly. We must use a little tact. I'll beg his pardon—the doing of it will make me sick—you shall ask for the cheque. Yes, we're fools; otherwise we shouldn't be here in this forsaken wilderness."

. . . .

Pap lived just outside the village in an *adobe* built upon a small hill to the north-west of our ranch. No garden surrounded it, no pleasant live oaks spread their shade between the porch and the big barns. Pap could sit on his porch and survey his domain stretching for leagues in front of him, but he never did sit down in the daytime—except on a saddle—and at night he went to bed early to save the expense of oil. Knowing his habits, we rode up to the *adobe* about eight. All was dark, and we could see, just below us, the twinkling lights of Paradise. After thundering at the door twice, Pap appeared, carrying a lantern. In answer to his first question, we told him that we had business to discuss. Muttering to himself, he led us into the house and lighted two candles in the parlour. We had never entered the parlour before, and accordingly looked about with interest and curiosity. The furniture, which had belonged to Pap's father-in-law, a Spanish-Californian, was of mahogany and horsehair, very good and substantial. In a bookcase were some ancient tomes bound in musty leather. A strange-looking piano, with a high back, covered with faded rose-coloured silk, stood in a corner. Some half a dozen daguerreotypes, a case of stuffed humming-birds, and a wreath of flowers embellished the walls. Upon everything lay the fine white dust of the dry year, which lay also thick upon many hearts.

"Sit ye down," said Pap. "I reckon ye've come up to ask for a loan?"

"Yes," said Ajax. "But first I wish to beg your pardon. I had no right to speak as I did in the store this evening. I'm sorry."

Pap nodded indifferently.

"'Twas good advice," he muttered. "I ain't skeered o' much, but diptheery gives me cold feet. I calc'late to skin out o' this and into the mountains to-morrer. How about this yere loan?"

"It's not for us," said I.

"I don't lend no good dollars on squatters' claims," said Pap. "Let's git to business."

We explained what we wanted. Upon the top of Pap's head the sparse grey hairs bristled ominously. His teeth clicked; his eyes snapped. He was furiously angry—as I had expected him to be.

"You've a nerve," he jerked out. "You boys come up here askin' me fer a thousand dollars. What air you goin' to do?"

"We've no money," said Ajax, "but we've leisure. I dare say we may dig graves."

"You're two crazy fools."

"We know that, Mr. Spooner."

"I'm a-goin' to tell ye something. Diptheery in this yere country is worse'n small-pox—and I've seen both." The look of horror came again into his face. "My wife an' my child died o' diptheery nearly thirty-five year ago." He shuddered. Then he pointed a trembling finger at one of the daguerreotypes. "There she is—a beauty! And before she died—oh, Heaven!"

I thought I saw something in his eyes, something human. Ajax burst out—

"Mr. Spooner, because of that, won't you help these poor people?"

"No! When she died, when the child died, something died in me. D'ye think I don't know what ye all think? Don't I know that I'm the orneriest, meanest old skinflint atween Point Sal and San Diego? That's me, and I'm proud of it. I aim to let the hull world stew in its own juice. The folks in these yere foothills need thinnin' anyway. Halloa! What in thunder's this?"

Through the door, which we had left ajar, very timidly, all blushes and dimples, and sucking one small thumb, came Sissy Leadham. She stood staring at us, standing on one leg and scratching herself nervously with the other.

" Why, Sissy ? " said Ajax.

She removed her thumb, reluctantly.

" Yas—it's me," she confessed. " Popsy don't know as I've comed up here." Then, suddenly remembering the conventions, she said, politely, " Good-evening, Mr. Spooner."

" Good-evening," said the astonished Pap.

" You wasn't expectin' me ? "

" I didn't think it was very likely as you'd call in," said Pap, " seein', Missy, as you'd never called in afore."

" My name's Sissy, not Missy. Well, I'll call again, Mr. Spooner, when you've no comp'ny."

" Jee-roosalem ! Call again — will ye ? An' s'pose I ain't to home—hey ? No, Missy—wal, Sissy, then—no, Sissy, you speak out an' tell me what brought you a-visitin '—me ? "

She shuffled very uneasily.

" I felt so awful sorry for you, Mr. Spooner. I jest hed to come, but I'll call again, early tomorrer."

" No, ye won't. Because I aim ter leave this yere ranch afore sun-up. Jest you speak up an' out. If yer folks has sent you here "—his eyes hardened and flashed—" to borrer money, why, you kin tell 'em I ain't got none to loan."

Sissy laughed gaily.

" Why, I know that, Mr. Spooner. It's jest because, be-cause yer so pore—so very, very pore, that I comed up."

" Is that so ? Because I'm so very poor ? "

" I heard that in the store this evenin'. I was a-comin' in as you was a-comin' out. I heard Popsy say you was the porest man in the county, porer than all of us pore folks put together."

She had lost her nervousness. She stood squarely before the old man, lifting her tender blue eyes to his.

"Wal—an' what are you a-goin' to do about it?"

"I can't do overly much, Mr. Spooner, but fer a little girl I'm rich. The dry year ain't hurt me any—yet. I've three dollars and sixty cents of my own."

One hand had remained tightly clenched. Sissy opened it. In the moist pink palm lay three dollars, a fifty-cent piece, and a dime. Never had Pap's voice sounded so harsh in my ears as when he said: "Do I understan' that ye offer this to—me?"

His tone frightened her.

"Yas, sir. Won't you p-p-please t-take it?"

"Did yer folks tell ye to give me this money?"

"Why, no. I'd oughter hev asked 'em, I s'pose, but I never thought o' that. Honest Injun, Mr. Spooner, I didn't—and—and it's my own money," she concluded, half defiantly, "an' Popsy said as how I could do what I liked with it. Please take it."

"No," said Pap.

He stared at us, clicking his teeth and frowning. Then he said, curtly, "Wal, I'll take the dime, Sissy—I kin make a dime go farther than a dollar, can't I, boys?"

"You bet," said Ajax.

"And now, Sissy, you run along home," said Pap.

"We'll take her," I said, for Sissy was a sworn friend of ours. At once she put her left hand into mine. We bade the old man good-night, and took leave of him. On the threshold Ajax turned and asked a question—

"Won't you reconsider your decision, Mr. Spooner?"

"No," he snapped, "I won't. I dunno as all this ain't a reg'lar plant. Looks like it. And, as I say, the scallywags in these yere foothills need thinnin'—they need thinnin'."

Ajax said something in a low voice which Sissy and I could not hear. Later I asked him what it was, because Pap had clicked his teeth.

"I told him," said my brother, "that he needn't think his call was coming, because I was quite certain that they did not want him either in Heaven—or in the other place."

"Oh," said I, "I thought that you were going to use a little tact with Pap Spooner."

. . . .

Next morning, early, we had a meeting in the store. A young doctor, a capital fellow, had come out from San Lorenzo with the intention of camping with us till the disease was wiped out; but he shook his head very solemnly when someone suggested that the first case, carefully isolated, might prove the last.

There were two fresh cases that night!

I shall not attempt to describe the horrors that filled the next three weeks. But, not for the first time, I was struck by the heroism and self-sacrifice of these rude foothill folk, whose great qualities shine brightest in the dark hours of adversity. My brother and I had passed through the big boom, when our part of California had become of a sudden a Tom Tiddler's ground, where the youngest and simplest could pick up gold and silver. We had seen our county drunk with prosperity—drunk and disorderly. And we had seen also these same revellers chastened by low prices, dry seasons, and commercial stagnation. But we had yet to witness the crowning sobering effect of a raging pestilence.

The little schoolmarm, Alethea-Belle Buchanan, organised the women into a staff of nurses. Mrs. Dumble enrolled herself amongst the band. Did she take comfort in the thought that she was wiping out John Jacob Dumble's innumerable rogueries? Let us hope so.

Within a week yellow bunting waved from half a score of cottages in and about Paradise. And then, one heavenly morning, as we were riding into the village, we saw the hideous warning fluttering outside George Leadham's door.

Sissy was down with it !

Poor George, his brown, weather-beaten face seamed with misery, met us at the garden gate.

" She's awful bad," he muttered, " an' the doc. says she'll be worse afore she's better."

Next door a man was digging two graves in his garden.

Meantime, Pap Spooner had disappeared. We heard that he had gone to a mountain ranch of his about fifteen miles away. Nobody missed him ; nobody cared whether he went or stayed. In the village store it was conceded that Pap's room, rain or shine, was better than his company. His name was never mentioned till it began to fall from Sissy Leadham's delirious lips.

The schoolmarm first told me that the child was asking for Andrew Spooner, moaning, wailing, shrieking for "pore old Pap." George Leadham was distracted.

" What in thunder she wants that ole cuss fer I can't find out. She's drivin' me plum crazy."

I explained.

" That's it," said George. " It's bin Pap an' her money night an' day fer forty-eight hours. She wanted ter give him—him, by Jing !—her money."

The doctor heard the story half an hour later. He had not the honour of Andrew Spooner's acquaintance, and he had reason to believe that all men in the foothills were devoid of fear.

" Fetch Pap," said he, in the same tone as he might have said, " Fetch milk and water ! "

We made no remark.

" I think," said the doctor, gravely, " that if this man comes at once the child may pull through."

"By Heaven! he shall come," said George Leadham to me. The doctor had hurried away.

"He won't come," said Ajax.

"If he don't," said the father, fiercely, "the turkey-buzzards'll hev a meal, for I'll shoot him in his tracks."

Ajax looked at me reflectively.

"George," said he, "shooting Pap wouldn't help little Sissy, would it? You and I can't handle this job. My brother will go. But—but, my poor old George, don't make ropes out of sand."

So I went.

When I started, the south-east wind, the rain-wind, had begun to blow, and it sounds incredible, but I was not aware of it. The pestilence had paralysed one's normal faculties. But riding due south-east I became, sooner or later, sensible of the change in the atmosphere. And then I remembered a chance remark of the doctor's. "We shall have this diphtheria with us till the rain washes it away," and one of the squatters had replied, bitterly, "Paradise'll be a cemetery an' nothin' else before the rain comes."

Passing through some pine woods I heard the soughing of the tree-tops. They were entreating the rain to come—to come quickly. How well I knew that soft, sibilant invocation! Higher up the few tufts of bunch grass that remained rustled in anticipation. On the top of the mountain, in ordinary years a sure sign of a coming storm, floated a veil of opaline sea mist. . . .

I found Pap and a greaser skinning a dead heifer. Pap nodded sulkily, thinking of his hay and his beans and bacon.

"What's up?" he growled.

"It's going to rain," said I.

"Ye ain't ridden from Paradise to tell me that.

An' rain's not a-comin', either. 'Twould be a miracle if it did. How's folks? I heard as things couldn't be worse."

"They are bad," said I. "Eubank's sister-in-law and two children are dead. Judge Spragg has lost four. In all about sixteen children have gone and five adults. That's Paradise alone; in the foothills——"

"What brings you here?"

It seemed hopeless to soften this hardened old man. I had thought of a dozen phrases wherewith to soap the ways, so to speak, down which might be launched my petition. I forgot them all, confronted by those malicious, sneering eyes, by the derisive, snarling grin.

"Little Sissy Leadham is dying."

"What d'you say?"

"Little Sissy Leadham is dying."

For my life I could not determine whether the news moved him or not.

"Wal?"

"And she's asking for you."

"Askin'—fer me?"

At last I had gripped his attention and interest.

"Why?"

"She wants to give you her money."

"Then it wa'n't a plant? 'Twa'n't fixed up atween you boys an' her?"

"It was her own idea—an idea so strong that it has taken possession of her poor wandering wits altogether."

"Is that so?" He moistened his lips. "And you—ye've come up here to ask me to go down there, into that p'isonous Paradise, because a little girl who ain't nothin' to me wants to give me three dollars and a half?"

"If you get there in time it may save her life."

"An' s'pose I lose mine—hey?"

I shrugged my shoulders. He stared at me as if I were a strange animal, clicking his teeth and twisting his fingers.

" Look ye here," he burst out, angrily, with a curious note of surprise and petulance in his voice, " you an' that brother o' yours know me, old Pap Spooner, purty doggoned well. Hev ye heard anyone ever speak a good word fer me ? "

" No one except—the schoolmarm."

" An' what did she say ? "

" She reckoned you must have thought the world of your own little girl."

He paid no attention. Suddenly he said, irrelevantly—

" That dime little Sissy give me is the first gift I've had made me in thirty-five year. Wal, young man, ye must ha' known—didn't ye now ?—that you was takin' big chances in comin' after ole Pap Spooner. I'll bet the hull crowd down in Paradise laughed at the idee o' fetchin' me—hey ? "

" Nobody laughs in Paradise now, and nobody except my brother, the doctor, and Sissy's father knows that I've come after you."

" Ye'll ride back and say the old man was skeered—hey ? "

" Well, you are, aren't you ? "

" Yes ; I've enough sense to know when I am skeered. I'm skeered plum to death, but all the same I'm a-goin' back with you, because Sissy give me that dime. There's a sack o' crushed barley behind that shed. Give yer plug a half feed, an' by then I'll be ready."

We rode into Paradise as night was closing in. The south-east wind was still blowing, and the thin veil of mist upon the mountain had grown into a cloud. In front of George Leadham's house were a couple of eucalyptus trees. Their long, lanceolate leaves were shaking as Pap and I passed through the gate. A man's shadow darkened the small porch. To the right was the room where Sissy lay. A light still shone in the window. The shadow moved; it was the doctor. He hurried forward.

"Glad to make your acquaintance," said he to Pap, whom he had never seen before.

"Air ye? You wa'n't expectin' me, surely?"

"Certainly," replied the doctor, impatiently. "What man wouldn't come under such circumstances?"

"Is there much danger?" said Pap, anxiously.

"The child is as ill as she can be."

"I meant fer—me."

"Great Scot! If you feel like that you'd better not go in." His tone was dully contemptuous.

"Wal—I do feel like that, on'y more so; an' I'm goin' in all the same. Reckon I'm braver'n you, 'cause you ain't skeered."

We entered the room. George Leadham was sitting by the bed. When he saw us he bent over the flushed face on the pillow, and said, slowly and distinctly: "Here's Mr. Spooner, my pretty; he's come. Do you hear?"

She heard perfectly. In a thick, choked voice she said: "Is that you, Pap?"

"It's me," he replied; "it's me, sure enough."

"Why, so 'tis. Popsy, where's my money?"

"Here, Sissy, right here."

She extended a thin, wasted hand.

"I want you to have it, Pap," she said, speaking very slowly, but in a clearer tone. "You see, it's like this. I've got the diptheery, an' I'm a-goin' to die. I don't need the money—see! And you do, you pore old Pap, so you must take it."

Pap took the money in silence. George Leadham had turned aside, unable to speak. I stood behind the door, out of sight. Sissy stared anxiously at Pap.

"Popsy said you wouldn't come, but I knew you would," she sighed. "Good-bye, you pore old Pap." She closed her eyes, but she held Pap's hand. The young doctor came forward with his finger upon his lips. Quietly, he signed to Pap to leave the room ; the old man shook his head. The doctor beckoned the father and me out on to the porch.

" Miracles sometimes happen," said he, gravely. " The child has fallen into a natural sleep."

But not for three hours did her grip relax of Pap's hand, and he sat beside her patiently, refusing to budge. Who shall say what was passing in his mind, so long absorbed in itself, and now, if one could judge by his face, absorbed at last in this child ?

When he came out of the room he spoke to the doctor in a new voice.

" If she wants anything—anything, you understan'—you get it—see ? "

" Certainly."

" And look ye here ; I shall be stayin' at my old *adobe*, but if the others want fer anything, you understan', get it—see ? "

" Certainly, Mr. Spooner. I shall not fail to call on you, sir, because we want many things."

" That's all right ; but," his tone grew hard and sharp, " if—if she—dies, this contrack is broke. The rest kin die too ; the sooner the better."

" But she won't die, Mr. Spooner," said the young doctor, cheerfully. " I feel in my bones, sir, that Sissy Leadham won't die."

And it may be added here that she didn't.

. . . .

At the ranch-house that night Ajax and I sat up, watching, waiting, praying for the rain that would wash the diphtheria from Paradise and despair from our hearts. The south-east wind sang louder and louder in the cotton woods by the creek ; the parched live oaks crackled with fear that the gathering clouds should roll by, the willows shivered and bowed themselves low in supplication. From the parched earth and every living thing thereon went up the passionate cry for water.

One by one we saw the stars fade out of the sky. The Dipper disappeared; then the Pole Star was extinguished. Orion veiled his triple splendours. The Milky Way ceased to be. . . .

"It's coming," whispered Ajax.

Suddenly the wind died down; the trees became mute; only the frogs croaked a final Hallelujah Chorus, because they alone knew. And then, out of the heaven which had seemed to have forsaken us, coming slowly at first, as if with the timid, halting step of a stranger; coming quickly and gladly afterwards, as an old friend comes back to the place where he is sure of a welcome; and lastly, with a sound of ten thousand pattering feet, with a whirring of innumerable wings, with a roar of triumph and ecstasy, Prosperity poured down upon Paradise.

IV

GLORIANA

FOR three weeks we had advertised for a cook—in vain! And ranch life, in consequence, began to lose colour and coherence. Even the animals suffered: the dogs, the chickens, and in particular the tame piglet, who hung disconsolate about the kitchen door watching, and perchance praying, for the hired girl that was not.

"This," said Ajax, "spells demoralisation."

He alluded to the plates which lay face downward upon the dining-room table. We had agreed to wash up every other meal, saving time at the expense of decency. One plate did double duty, for we used the top for breakfast and the bottom for dinner. Before supper we scrubbed it thoroughly and began again.

"And this bread of yours," I retorted warmly—the plate labour-saving scheme was a happy thought of my own—"spells dyspepsia."

"True," he admitted forlornly. "I can make, but not bake bread. In a domestic crisis like this many things must be left underdone. We must find a cook. I propose that we ride to the village, and rope some aged virgin."

We discussed the propriety of such a raid with spirit. I contended that we might have reason to regret, at the end of another rope, so high-handed a proceeding.

"You are right," said Ajax. "That is the worst of this confounded ranch. Here, we enjoy neither the amenities of civilisation nor the freedom of the desert. However, it's always darkest before dawn, and I've a feeling in my bones that the present state of affairs cannot last. Something will turn up."

That afternoon Gloriana turned up.

We were sitting upon the verandah oppressed with the weight of beans, bacon, and soggy biscuit. As we smoked in silence our eyes rested gloomily upon the landscape—our domain. Before us lay an amber-coloured, sun-scorched plain; beyond were the foot-hills, bristling with chaparral, scrub-oaks, pines and cedars; beyond these again rose the grey peaks of the Santa Lucia range, pricking the eastern horizon. Over all hung the palpitating skies, eternally and exasperatingly blue, a-quiver with light and heat.

" Somebody's coming," said Ajax.

The country road, white with alkaline dust, crossed the ranch at right angles. Far away, to the left, was a faint blur upon the pink hills.

" It's no wagon," said Ajax idly, " and a *vaquero* would never ride in the dust. It must be a buggy."

Five minutes later we could distinguish a quaint figure sitting upright in an ancient buckboard whose wheels wobbled and creaked with almost human infirmity. A mule furnished the motive power.

" Is it a man or a woman ? " said Ajax.

" Possibly," I replied, " a cook."

" She is about to pay us a visit. Yes, it's a woman, a bundle of bones, dust and alpaca crowned with a sombrero. A book-agent, I swear. Go and tell her we have never learned to read."

I demurred. Finally we spun a dollar to decide upon which of us lay the brutal duty of turning away the stranger within our gates. Fortune frowned on me, and I rose reluctantly from my chair.

"Air you the hired man?" said the woman in the buggy, as I looked askance into her face.

"I work here," I replied, "for my board—which is not of the best."

"Ye seem kinder thin. Say—air the lords to home?"

"The lords?"

"Yes, the lords. They tole me back ther," she jerked her head in the direction of the village, "that two English lords owned a big cattle-ranch right here; an' I thought, mebbee, that they'd like ter see—me."

A pathetic accent of doubt quavered upon the personal pronoun.

"Ye kin tell 'em," she continued, "that I'm here. Yes, sir, I'm a book-agent, an' my book will interest them—sure."

Her eyes, soft blue eyes, bespoke hope; her lips quivered with tell-tale anxiety. Something inharmonious about the little woman, a queer lack of adjustment between voice and mouth, struck me as singular, but not unpleasing.

"It's called," she pleaded, in the tenderest tones, "*A Golden Word from Mother.* I sell it bound in cloth, sheep, or moroccy. It's perfectly lovely—in moroccy."

"One of the—er—lords," said I gravely, "is here. I'll call him. I think he can read."

This, according to our fraternal code, was rank treachery, yet I felt no traitor. Ajax obeyed my summons, and, sauntering across the sun-baked yard, lifted his hat to the visitor. She bowed politely, and blinked, with short-sighted eyes, at my brother's overalls and tattered canvas shirt. I have seen Ajax, in Piccadilly, glorious in a frock-coat and varnished boots. I have seen him, as Gloriana saw him for the first time, in rags that might provoke the scorn of Lazarus. With the thermometer at a hundred in the shade, custom curtseys to convenience. Ajax boasted with reason that the loosening of a single safety-pin left him in condition for a plunge into the pool at the foot of the corral.

"I hope you're well, lord," said the little woman; "an' if ye ain't, why—what I've got here 'll do ye more good than a doctor. I reckon ye hev a mother, an' naterally she thinks the world of ye. Well, sir, I bring ye a golden word from her very lips. Jest listen to this. I ain't much on the elocute, but I'm goin' ter do my best."

We listened patiently as she declaimed half a page of wretched prose. Her voice rose and fell in a sing-song cadence, but certain modulations of tone lent charm to the absurd words. When she finished her eyes were full of tears.

"That is very nice indeed," said Ajax softly. "I should like to buy your book."

Her hands trembled.

"I sell it in cloth at—one dollar; in sheep at—one, six bits; in reel moroccy, with gold toolin' at—two an' a half."

"We must certainly secure a copy in gold and morocco."

Her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"Two copies," I suggested rashly: "one for you, Ajax; one for me."

"Ye kin take yer copy in cloth," said the little woman, compassionately, "sein' as ye're only workin' for yer board."

"In gold and morocco," I replied firmly. "The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world. A golden word from mother cannot be fittingly bound in fustian."

"Ye must hev had awful nice mothers, both of ye," she said simply. "Do I sell many books? No, sir. Farmer-folks in Californy ain't got the money ter spend in readin' matter. They're in big luck these times if they kin pay the interest on their mortgages. With wheat at eighty cents a cental, an' barley not wuth the haulin', it seems most an impertinence to ask grangers ter buy books."

"Do you make twenty dollars a month at the business?"

She shook her head sorrowfully.

"This is September," said Ajax, "and within six weeks the rains will begin. What will you do then?"

She regarded him wistfully, but made no reply.

"Your mule," continued Ajax, "is about played out—poor beast. Will you stay here this winter, and keep house for us? I daresay you cook very nicely; and next spring, if you feel like it, you can start out bookselling again."

"My cookin' is sech as white folks kin eat, but——"

"We will pay you twenty dollars a month."

"The wages air more'n enough, but——"

"And the work will be light."

"I ain't scar't o' work," she retorted valiantly, "but——"

"It's settled, then," said Ajax, in his masterful way. "If you'll get down, I'll unhitch the mule and put him in the barn. My brother will show you the house."

She descended, protesting, but we could not catch the words that fell from her lips.

"You must tell us your name," said Ajax.

"It's Gloriana," she faltered.

"Gloriana? Gloriana—what?"

"Jes—Gloriana."

. . . .

"She is a type," said Ajax, a few days later.

"A type of what?"

"Of the women who suffer and are not strong There are many such in this Western country

I'd like to hear her story. Is she married or single? old or young? crazy or sane?"

"Gloriana," I answered, "satisfies our appetites but not our curiosity."

As time passed, her reticence upon all personal matters became exasperating. At the end of the first month she demanded and received her salary. Moreover, refusing our escort, she tramped three dusty miles to the village post-office, and returned penniless but jubilant. At supper Ajax said—

"It's more blessed to give than to receive—eh, Gloriana?"

She compressed her lips, but her eyes were sparkling. After supper Ajax commented upon her improved appearance in her presence. He confessed himself at a loss to account for this singular rejuvenescence.

"Expecting company, Gloriana?"

"Mebbee—an' mebbee not."

"You brought home a large parcel," said Ajax. "A precious parcel. Why, you held it as a woman holds her first baby."

She smiled, and bade us good-night.

"I've no call ter stan' aroun' gassin'," she assured us. "I've work ter do—a plenty of it, too."

During the month of October she spent all her leisure hours locked up in her own room; and, waiting upon us at meals, quoted freely that famous book—*A Golden Word from Mother*. We often heard her singing softly to herself, keeping time to the click of her needle. When pay-day came she demanded leave of absence. The village, she told us, was sadly behind the times, and with our permission she proposed to drive her mule and buckboard to the county seat—San Lorenzo.

"I've business of importance," she said proudly, "ter transack."

She returned the following evening with a larger parcel than the first.

"I've bought a bonnet," she confessed shyly, "an' trimmins."

We prevailed upon her to show us these purchases: white satin ribbon, jet, and a feather that might have graced the hat of the Master of Ravenswood. The "locating" of this splendid plume was no easy task.

"Maxims," sighed Gloriana, "is mostly rubbish. Now, fine feathers—an' ther ain't a finer feather than this in San Lorenzy county—don't make fine birds. A sparrer is always a sparrer, an' can't look like an ostridge noway. But, good land! feathers is my weakness."

She burned much oil that night, and on the morrow the phœnix that sprang from the flames was proudly displayed.

"I bought more'n a bonnet yesterday," she said, with her head on one side, and a slyly complacent smile upon her lips. "Yes, sir, stuff ter make a dress—a party dress, the finest kind o' goods."

Ajax stared helplessly at me. The mystery that encompassed this woman was positively indecent.

"An' shoes," she concluded. "I bought me a pair, hand sewn, with French tips—very dressy."

Later, inspired by tobacco, we agreed that the problem was solved. Our head *vaquero*, Uncle Jake, gaunt as a coyote at Christmas, and quite as hungry, had fallen a victim to Gloriana's fleshpots. He lived in an old *adobe* near the big corral, boarded himself and a couple of Mexicans upon *tortillas*, *frijoles* and bacon, and was famous throughout the countryside as a confirmed bachelor and woman hater. We entertained a high regard for this veteran, because he seldom got drunk, and always drove cattle *slowly*. To him the sly Gloriana served Anglo-Saxon viands: pies, "jell'" (compounded according to a famous Wisconsin recipe), and hot biscuit, light as the laughter of children! What misogynist can withstand such arts? I remembered that at the fall calf-branding Uncle Jake had expressed his approval of our *cordon bleu* in no measured terms.

"You've noted," he said, "that a greaser jest naterally hates ter handle mares. He rides a horse, an' he's right. The best o' mares will kick. Now, Glory Anne can't help bein' a woman, but I swear she's bin mighty well broke. She works right up into the collar — quiet an' steady, an' keeps her tongue, whar it belongs, shet up in her mouth. I've seen a sight o' wimmen I thot less of than Glory Anne."

I repeated these words to Ajax. He admitted their significance, in connection with bonnets and furbelows, and we both went to bed with a sound of marriage-bells in our ears. We slept soundly, convinced that neither Gloriana nor Uncle Jake would leave our service, and at breakfast the next morning discoursed at length upon the subject of wedding presents.

"What would you suggest, Gloriana," said Ajax, "as suitable for a middle-aged bridegroom?"

She considered the question thoughtfully, a delightful smile upon her lips.

"Ther's nothin' more interestin' than marryin', excep' mebbee the courtin'," she replied softly, "an' a gift is, so ter speak, a message o' love an' tenderness from one human heart t' another. With poor folks, who ain't experts in the use o' words, a gift means more 'n tongue kin tell. I'm sot myself on makin' things. Every stitch I put into a piece o' fancy work fer—a friend makes me feel the happier. Sech sewin' is a reel labour o' love, an' I kinder hate ter hurry over it, because, as I was sayin', it means so much that I'd like ter say, but bein' ignorant don't know how. A present fer a middle-aged bridegroom? Well, now, if 'twas me, I'd make him a nice comfortable bed-spread, with the best an' prettiest o' stitchin."

We both laughed. Uncle Jake under a gorgeous counterpane would make a graven image smile. Gloriana laughed with us.

"It 'd be most too dainty fer some," she said, with a surprising sense of humour. "but I was thinkin' ye wanted a gift fer one o' yer high-toned relations in the old country. No? Well, take yer time: a gift ain't lightly chosen."

"I shall tackle Uncle Jake," said Ajax, as he rode over the ranch. "Gloriana is too discreet, but she bought that bonnet for her own wedding."

Uncle Jake, however, was cunning of fence.

"I don't feel lonesome," he declared. "Ye see I'm a cattle man, an' I like the travelled trails. I ain't huntin' no quicksands. Many a feller has mired down tryin' a new crossin'. No, sir, I calkilate ter remain single."

"He's very foxy," commented Ajax, "but he means business. It really bothers me that they won't confide in us."

The November rains were unusually heavy that year, and confined us to the house. Gloriana had borrowed a sewing-machine from a neighbour, and worked harder than ever, inflaming her eyes and our curiosity. We speculated daily upon her past, present and future, having little else to distract us in a life that was duller than a Chinese comedy. We waxed fat in idleness, but the cook grew lean.

"You're are losing flesh, Gloriana," said I, noting her sunken cheeks and glittering eyes.

"In a good cause," she replied fervently. "Anyways, ther ain't a happier woman than me in the state of Californy! Well, I'm most thro' with my sewing, an' I'd like ter show ye both what I've done, but——"

"We've have been waiting for this, Gloriana," said Ajax, tartly. "As a member of the family you have not treated my brother and myself fairly. This mysterious work of yours is not only wearing you to skin and bone, it is consuming us with curiosity."

"Ye're jokin', Mr. Ajax."

"This is no joking matter, Gloriana."

She blushed, and glanced indecisively at two solemn faces.

"Ye've bin more 'n good ter me," she said slowly, "but a secret is a secret till it's told. I hate ter tell my secret, an'—an' yer both young unmarried men. It's really embarrassin'."

"Your secret is no secret," said my brutal brother. "Somebody, Gloriana, is about to get married—eh ?"

"Good land! How did ye come ter guess that ?"

"Uncle Jake has not said a word."

"Well,—why should he ?"

"He's as close as a clam—the old sinner. So we can congratulate you, Gloriana ?"

"Ye kin indeed."

We shook hands, and she led the way to her own room. There, spread upon her bed, lay some dainty garments, exquisitely fashioned,—a regular trousseau! Even to our inexperienced eyes the beauty of the workmanship was amazing.

"A woman," she murmured, "likes ter look at sech things. An' I do think these air good enough."

"Good enough!" we repeated. "They're fit for a queen."

"An' a queen is goin' ter wear 'em," said Gloriana proudly—"a queen o' beauty."

We stared blankly at each other. Had Cupid robbed his victim of her wits ?

"They air fer Miss Miriam Standish, who was queen o' beauty at the San Lorenzy carnival.

Miss Standish is the granddaughter of Doctor Standish. Ye've heard o' him—of course ? "

She glanced keenly at Ajax, who rose to the occasion with an alacrity that I trust the recording angel appreciated.

" Of course," he said hastily. " Doctor Standish is a man of mark ; as a physician, he——"

" He ain't a physician," said Gloriana. " He's a doctor o' divinity—a learned, godly man."

" And his granddaughter is about to marry——"

" Mr. Hubert Leadbetter. I should say *Professor* Leadbetter, who keeps the biggest drug-store in town."

We had bought drugs from the Professor, and were happily able to testify to his personal charms. Gloriana beamed.

" Ther ain't a finer young man in the land, Mr. Ajax : he's jest as good as his own sarsaparilla."

" You are going to attend the wedding ? " said I, thinking of the wonderful bonnet.

" If you please," said Gloriana. " I jest couldn't stay away. Why, I've made things fer Miriam Standish ever since she was born. That is how I learned ter sew as few women kin sew."

Ajax touched one of the garments lightly, as became a bachelor.

" This work will bring you many shekels, Gloriana. I had no idea you were such a needlewoman."

" What ! " she cried, her face crimson. " Do you think I'd take money from Miriam Standish ? Why——"

She stopped short in confusion, and covered her poor face with trembling hands.

" I beg your pardon," said Ajax gravely, " I wouldn't hurt your feelings, Gloriana, for the world."

She looked up, irresolutely.

" I reckon I've said too much or too little," she said slowly. " Ye're both gen'lemen, an' ye've bin awful kind ter me. I kin trust ye with my secret, an' I'm goin' ter do it. The Standishes, are New England folk—high-toned an' mighty particler. It's as easy fer them ter be virtuous as ter eat punkin pie fer breakfast. I come from Wisconsin, where we think more of our bodies than our souls ; an' 'twas in Wisconsin that I first met Dr. Standish. He had a call to the town, wher I lived with—with my sister. She, my sister, was a real pretty girl then, but of a prettiness that soon fades. An' she hired out as cook ter the Doctor. He was a good man, an' a kind one, but she paid back his kindness by runnin' off with his only son."

"Surely," said Ajax gently, "the son was also to blame?"

"No, sir, my sister was ter blame, an' she knew it. We was common folk, Mr. Ajax, what they would call in the South—white trash, an' the Standishes was real quality. My sister knew that, an' refused to marry the young man, tho' he asked her on his bended knees. Then he died, an'—an' my sister died, an' nothin' was left but the sorrow an' the shame, an'—Miriam."

The name fell softly on a silence that we respected. Presently she continued—

"Doctor Standish offered to take the child, an' I dared not keep her. His terms were awful hard, but just: the scandal 'd broke up his home, an' his heart. He tole me he'd take Miriam ter Californy, an' that she must never know the story of her mother's sin. That was right, Mr. Ajax—eh?"

"I don't know, Gloriana. Go on."

"I promised him never ter speak to the child, an' I've kept my word; but he let me make her things. That was kind of him—very kind."

"Very kind, indeed," said Ajax.

"I followed 'em ter Californy, an' worked out, an' sold books an' peddled fruit, but I've kep' track o' little Miriam."

" You have never spoken to her, you say ? "

" Never. Doctor Standish kin trust me. He's posted me, too. He tole me o' the wedding. I got word the night I first went ter the village, an' that's why—" she smiled through her tears—" that's why I wore my teeth. They cost me twenty dollars, an' I keep 'em fer high days an' holidays."

Ajax began to pace up and down the room. I heard him swearing to himself, and his fists were clenched. I felt certain that he was about to interfere in matters that did not concern us.

" Miss Standish should be told the truth," said he at last.

" No, no," she exclaimed. " I'm a wicked woman to wish ter kiss her. I done wrong in telling the secret, but yer sympathy jest twisted it outer me. Promise me, Mr. Ajax, that ye'll never give me away."

We pledged our word, and left her.

. . . .

" Gloriana's dun days must soon come to an end," said Ajax to me upon the eve of the wedding. " Why shouldn't she marry Uncle Jake ? The old chap wants her. He informed me this afternoon that a double team travelled farther than a single horse. And he hangs about the kitchen door all the time, and divides Gloriana's favours with the pig."

" Tell him to propose."

" I'll have to do it for him," replied my brother. " Uncle Jake has not the gift of tongues."

We accompanied Gloriana to San Lorenzo ; as we feared to trust our friend—for so we had come to regard her—with the mule, a mischievous beast, spoiled by prosperity. Ajax drove a skittish pair of colts. Gloriana and I occupied the back seat of our big spring wagon.

" My brother is not Uncle Jake," said Ajax, as soon as the colts had settled down to business, "but he'll tell you all the pretty things the old man says about you."

"Uncle Jake is puffectly rediclous," replied Gloriana gaily. "His love is cupboard love."

"He has mired down at last."

"Nonsense! Mr. Ajax."

"He is set on matrimony. You are the one woman in the world for him. Take him, Gloriana; and then we'll all live together for ever and ever."

"Mr. Ajax, you'd sooner joke than eat."

"I'm not joking now. Uncle Jake is an honest man, with money laid by. He would make you comfortable for life, and such a marriage might pave the way to—to a better understanding with Doctor Standish."

Her face flushed at these last words, and fire flooded her eyes. Looking at her, I realised that long ago this worn woman must have been a beautiful girl.

"No," she answered steadily. "I wouldn't say Yes to the Angel Gabriel. Uncle Jake and I would make a baulky team. He's obstinate as my old mule, an' so am I. An' there's another thing: I'm most petered out, an' need a rest. Mattermony ain't rest."

My brother had tact enough to change the subject.

Descending the San Lorenzo grade, a sharp incline, Gloriana called our attention to a view panoramic and matchless beneath the glamour of sunset. Below us lay the mission town, its crude buildings aglow with rosy light; to the left was the cañon, a frowning wilderness of manzanita, cactus and chaparral; to the right towered the triune peak of the Bishop, purple against an amber sky; in the distance were the shimmering waters of the Pacific. Upon the face of the landscape brooded infinite peace, and the soft shadows of evening.

"In Californy," said our passenger, "the glorious works o' the Lord air revealed. There's the Bishop: he looks fine to-night. Ye kin see the peak, but the sea fog's crawlin' in, an' shets off the main body o' the mountain. That's wher the fogs air always thickest. An' that's wher I lost my way, Mr. Ajax. Yes, sir, my feet stumbled on the dark mountain, as the prophet says, but I clumb the stony places, an' now, on the top, its clear."

"Gloriana," said Ajax, after a pause, "will you allow my brother, who is a grave and learned signor, to plead your cause with Doctor Standish? I know what lies nearest your heart."

In this impudent fashion he laid a grievous burden on me; for I have no stomach for other folk's pastry, yet the hope that glistened upon Gloriana's face whetted a strange appetite.

"I'll speak to him—if you wish it," said I.

"No," she returned, her eyes giving the lie to her lips. "It wouldn't be right."

But a woman's brain is a sorry advocate against her heart. Ajax, as I expected, put her scruples to rout. It was agreed that I should carry, as credentials, Gloriana's present—the parcel she hugged to her bosom, weighty with love and linen; that the interview should take place after dinner; that the recognition of Gloriana as Miriam's blood-relation should be not demanded but suggested with all deference due to a doctor of divinity. The Standishes boarded at the Hotel Buena Vista, where we always stayed; Gloriana was set down at a modest two-bit house, some three-quarters of a mile distant.

As the hour of meeting the Doctor approached, my courage oozed from every pore, distilling a malignant dew of mistrust that not even the optimism of Ajax could evaporate. As we sat at meat I noted with apprehension the stern features of Standish, who occupied an adjoining table. He ate sparingly, as became an old man, and drank no wine. His granddaughter, a charming girl, with eyes that reminded me of Gloriana, chattered gaily to him, but he replied in monosyllables. Doubtless he was thinking of the parting on the morrow.

Half-an-hour later he received me in his room, and asked courteously in what way he could serve me.

I laid my credentials upon the table. They were flanked, I remarked, by a Bible, and a well-worn book of prayer.

" This," I began lamely, " is a present from our housekeeper, Gloriana, to your granddaughter. She asked me to deliver it into your hands."

" I thank you, sir," he replied stiffly. " You say this—er—woman is your housekeeper ? "

" Our housekeeper—and our friend."

" Indeed. Well, sir, I am obliged to you. Good-night."

" A present," said I, " demands an acknowledgment."

" An acknowledgment ? You look at me very strangely, young man."

Upon this I spoke ; explaining, in halting sentences, my mission. He listened attentively, a frown upon his somewhat narrow forehead.

" How dare you interfere in such matters ! " he asked, in a voice that quavered with suppressed rage. " What right have you to come between me and a woman, an ignorant, immoral creature, whose very presence is contamination ? "

" Ignorant, illiterate—yes ; but a braver, truer, more loving spirit never breathed. I count it a privilege to know her. Surely she has suffered enough for a sister's sin ! "

" My life has been poisoned," he muttered. " I was robbed at once of my son and of my profession, for I dared not preach what I could not practise—forgiveness. Leave me, sir."

" I beg your pardon," said I bitterly. " If you turn a deaf ear to this " (I touched his Bible), " and these " (I tore open the parcel, and spread Gloriana's handiwork upon the table), " how can I expect you to listen to me ? "

" You are in possession of all the facts, sir. Don't presume to judge me. Go—and take these things with you. It has been the object of my life to keep my granddaughter and this woman apart. I allowed her to work for the child, but the clothes she has been sending I have given to —others. Already, despite my efforts, she suspects that there is some unhappy mystery about her birth."

. . . .

Ajax met me on the threshold of our cheerless hotel parlour, and listened confounded to my story. As we sat smoking and talking the bell-boy ushered in Gloriana. When she caught sight of her precious parcel she gasped with satisfaction.

" I'm most choked," she panted, " in trying ter get here in time. I reckon I run most o' the way. Eversince ye set me down I've bin tryin'studyin'an' worryin'. I don't want ye," she turned an anxious face to mine, " ter speak ter Doctor Standish to-night, fer it might onsettle Miriam. Good land o' Peter, how short my breath is ! Ye see ther couldn't be room in the child's heart jest now fer me an' the *Pro*fessor. An' when that ther idee took aholt it seemed as if I couldn't rest till I saw ye. I'm mighty glad I was in time."

The words fell from her lips in sobs and gasps.

" It's all right," said Ajax. " Sit down, Gloriana. You deserve a scolding."

As he spoke she sank upon the couch, and tugged convulsively at the white linen band around her throat.

"She is ill," whispered Ajax. "Run for assistance—quick!"

I chanced to meet the bell-boy, and dispatched him in search of a physician. Unable to discriminate between doctors of medicine and divinity, the youth summoned in hot haste Doctor Standish. His granddaughter, learning that a woman was in sore distress, accompanied him. They entered the room together. The Doctor motioned the girl back, but she hastened forward, and, looking with infinite compassion into the poor twisted face, took Gloriana's hands in hers. Some one administered brandy and spirits of ammonia.

"How did this happen?" said the Doctor aside to me.

I spared him nothing in the recital, and his stern features softened as I emphasised Gloriana's anxiety to save Miriam from worry. As I finished, the faithful creature opened her eyes, which rested naturally upon the face of Miriam.

"Why—it's my little girl," she said faintly.

Doctor Standish bent forward.

"If she mistakes you for one of her own kin, don't undeceive her. Play the part."

Miriam nodded, and kissed the frail hands that fluttered round her head.

"Gimme my parcel," she said presently, in a stronger voice. "Mercy sakes! I'm awful weak; but I'd like ter show my little girl the things I made for her."

The parcel was brought and untied. Gloriana touched the garments tenderly.

"Nothin'," she murmured, "kin come closer to ye than these pretty things, excep' the love I stitched into 'em. When you wear 'em you'll think o' me, Miss Standish."

At the sound of her name the girl started, and looked askance at her grandfather, who turned his head aside.

"Who is this woman!" she asked in a low voice.

The answer came from Gloriana, slowly and distinctly.

"I'm—nothin'—to—ye; but ye've bin the world an' all ter me. Well—I said I'd never go ter my little girl, because I wasn't fit, but I always thought that the Lord in His mercy would bring her ter me. Ye wore the clothes I sent, an' mebbee ye wondered who made 'em. 'Twas the happiness o' my life sewing on 'em, an' ter think you was wearin' them. I've worked awful hard, but I kin take it easy—now. I feel reel sleepy, too. Good-night, my pretty, good-night!"

We were quite unprepared for what happened, believing that our poor friend was merely overwrought and weary. But as the words "good-night" fell softly upon our ears Gloriana sighed peacefully—and died.

"Who is this woman?" said Miriam for the second time, thinking that Gloriana had fallen asleep.

The Doctor was not so deceived. He pressed forward, and laid his trembling fingers upon the wrist of the dead, and then bent his head till it rested upon the breast of her he had counted a scandalous sinner. When he confronted us the tears were rolling down his face.

"May God forgive me!" he cried, falling upon his knees. "This woman, Miriam, was your mother."

V

BUMBLEPUPPY

BUMBLEPUPPY is a synonym of whist played in defiance of certain time-honoured conventions and principles. Ajax said with reason that Johnnie Kapus, the nephew of our neighbour, old man Kapus, played the game of life in such a sorry, blundering fashion that he marvelled why his uncle gave him house-room. Ajax christened Johnnie—Bumblepuppy.

Once we hired Johnnie to work for us at the rate of half-a-dollar a day. A heavy rain-storm had just taken place, and my brother insisted that Johnnie was the right man to fill up the "wash-outs" in and about the corrals. He was strong, big, docile as a cow, and he lived within a few hundred yards of the ranch-house.

Johnnie was provided with a spade and a wheelbarrow, and led to a gaping hole beneath the barn. I explained that the rain had washed away the soil and made the hole, which must be filled up before more rain should fall.

"Wheer shall I git the dirt from?" Johnnie demanded.

"From the most convenient place," said I.

Ajax and I returned to the barn an hour later. The hole was filled; but another hole, from which Johnnie had taken the dirt, as large as the first, seriously threatened the under-pinning of the building.

Ajax swore. Johnnie looked at me, as he drawled out :

"The boss told me to git the dirt wheer 'twas mos' handy."

Ajax grinned.

"I see. It was the boss' fault, not yours. Now then, Johnnie, the work must be done all over again."

"If you say so, boys, I'll do it."

As we moved away Ajax pointed out the propriety of giving explicit directions. At dinner time we came back to the barn. Johnnie had taken the earth out of the first hole and put it back again into the second !

"You star-spangled fool ! " said Ajax.

"You tole me," replied Johnnie, "that the work mus' be did all over agen—an' I done it."

"Directions," I remarked, "may be made too explicit."

After this incident, we always spoke of Johnnie as Bumblepuppy.

Some six months later Alethea-Belle told us that Johnnie Kapus was doing "chores" for the widow Janssen ; milking her cow, taking care of the garden, and drawing water. Upon inquiry, however, we learned that the cow was drying up, the well had caved in, and the garden produced no weeds, it is true, and no vegetables !

"Why doesn't the widow sack him ? " Ajax asked.

"Mis' Janssen is kinder sorry for Johnnie," replied the schoolmistress ; then she added irrelevantly, "There's no denyin' that Johnnie Kapus has the loveliest curly hair."

About a fortnight after this, when the July sun was at its zenith and the starch out of everything animate and inanimate, old man Kapus came up to the ranch-house. Johnnie, he said, disappeared during the previous night.

"And he's bin kidnapped, too," the uncle added.

"Kidnapped?"

"Yes, boys—hauled out o' winder! A man weighin' close onter two hundred pounds 'd naterally prefer to walk out o' the door, but the widder hauled Johnnie out o' winder."

"The widow?"

"Mis' Janssen. There was buggy tracks at the foot o' the melon patch, and the widder's missin'. She's put it up to marry my Johnnie. I suspicioned something, but I counted on Johnnie. I sez to myself: 'Others might be tempted by a plump, well-lookin' widder, but not Johnnie.' Ye see, boys, Johnnie ain't quite the same as you an' me."

"Not quite," said Ajax.

"Mebbee ye've wondered why I sot sech store by Johnnie. Wal—I'll tell ye. Johnnie's paw an' me was brothers an' pardners afore the war. An' after Bull Run John sez to me: 'Abram,' he sez, 'we mustn't let Ole Glory trail in the dust.' That's what he sez. 'John,' I answers, 'what kin we do to prevent it?' '*Enlist*,' sez he. An' we done it. But afore we go within smellin' distance o' the rebs, yes, boys, afore we saw 'em, a bullet comes slam-bang into John's head."

The old man paused, overcome. We turned our eyes from his wrinkled, troubled face, as Ajax entreated him to say no more.

"He died in defence of his flag," I muttered.

"Ah!" exclaimed Johnnie's uncle, "I thought you'd say that. No, boys, John didn't die. A Kapus takes a heap o' killin.' John up an lived—an' *married!* He married my girl, too, Susie Bunker. Susie felt awful sorry for him, for that there rebel bullet had kinder made scrambled eggs with pore John's brains. I let Susie marry John, because I knew that he needed a good woman's keer. And then Johnnie was born: a whoppin' baby, but with a leetle something missin' in his purty head. Then John died, and soon enough Susie got peaked-face an' lost her relish fer food. She tuk a notion that John needed her t'otherside. Just afore she sent in her checks, she give me Johnnie, an' she ast my pardon for marryin' John instead o' me. I tole her she done right. An' I promised to look after Johnnie. Up to date, boys, I hev. But now that darned widder woman has onexpectedly kidnapped him. What kin I do? "

" The widow will look after both of you," I suggested.

" What! Share my Johnnie with her? Not much. She stole that there boy from me by force. By Jing! I'll take him from her without liftin' a finger. Ye see, Johnnie is mighty apt to disappint the widder. Sometimes—more often than not—Johnnie *is*—disappintin'! I allus jedge the pore boy by contrairies. Most o' men when they marry air apt to forgit them as raised 'em, but Johnnie'll pine fer me. I know it. Bless his heart, he can't git along nohow without me."

Listening to this simple talk, watching the old man's rough, honest face, my own heart grew chill with apprehension. The widow had a small income and many charms. It was certain that Johnnie's curly hair, bright blue eyes, and stalwart figure had captivated her fancy. Pity had bloomed into love. The pair must have driven —as fast as the widow's steed could travel—into San Lorenzo. By this time, high noon, the licence, doubtless, had been issued and the marriage solemnised by parson or justice of the peace. Once married, no man—not even old man Kapus— would be justified in tearing Bumblepuppy from the fond arms of his bride.

We asked Johnnie's uncle to dine with us. He thanked us warmly.

" Boys, you surmise that I'm feelin' lonesome.

And I am. But I won't be lonesome long. The widder can't let that cow o' hers go without two milkin's, an' her pigs an' chickens must be fed. She'll be back in the village 'bout four or five ; an' to-night, to-night, boys, my Johnnie 'll be home to supper."

Ajax discreetly descanted upon the widow's fine complexion, but old man Kapus lent him but an indifferent ear.

" She's fat an' slick," he admitted, " but Johnnie's fat an' slick, too. An' who made him so ? Why—his uncle Abram. D'ye think now that I've fed him up and got him into sech fine shape that he'll leave me ? No, sir. You might act that-a-way, but not my Johnnie."

After dinner, we accompanied Uncle Abram as far as the creek which flows between the village and our domain. Here stand some fine cottonwood trees and half-a-dozen lordly white-oaks. The spot is famous as a picnicking ground, and in the heat of summer is as cool a place as may be found in the county. And here, paddling in the brook like an urchin, we found Bumblepuppy. His eyes sparkled as they fell upon the face of his uncle.

" Ye've got back, Johnnie," said the old man.

" Yas. 'Twas hotter'n a red-hot stove on the road."

" Ye druv in with the widder woman ? "

" Yas. I druv in with her ; but I walked back. Guess I run the most o' the way, too."

" An' Mis' Janssen—wheer is she ? "

" I dunno', uncle Abram."

" Is she still a widder woman, Johnnie ? "

" She was when I left her," said Bumblepuppy.

He had ascended the bank. Sitting down, he began to put on his socks. I noted the admirable symmetry of calf and ankle ; I thought of the lungs and muscles which had sustained the superb body during a twenty-six mile run between blazing earth and sky.

"What in thunder did ye go to town fer?" asked the old man. "Speak up, Johnnie. Give us the cold facts."

Then Bumblepuppy made the speech of his life.

"Uncle Abram, you tole me to obey Mis' Janssen, an' do what she said."

"That's so, Johnnie."

"Yesday, she tole me to fix up an' be ready to go to San Lorenzy with her. She said we'd travel by night 'cause o' the heat. An' she said I was not to 'sturb you. She said she'd come to the winder an' tap. Then I'd crawl out without 'sturbin' you. Wal—she come around about two, jest as the roosters was a'crowin 'fer the second time. I slipped out o' winder in my stockined feet. I hope I didn't 'sturb ye?"

"Ye didn't. Go on."

"In town Mis' Janssen said she'd fixed it up to marry me. She said I needed a lovin' wife, and that me an' she'd have a Fourth o' July time together. I said nothing, 'cause you'd tole me never to interrup' a lady when she was a-talkin'. She kep' on a-talkin' till we got to the Court House, where Mis' Janssen bought a licence. Then we hunted a minister. Bimeby, he ast me if I was willin' to take Sairy Anne Janssen to be my wife——"

"An' ye said NO, my own Johnnie?"

"That's what I done, Uncle Abram. And then she sez, kinder wheedlin': 'But you will marry yer Sairy Anne, Johnnie, won't ye?' And then, gittin' scared, I kinder forgot my manners, fer I said: 'No—I'm d——d if I will!' An' I disremember what she said nex', but I found myself in the road, a-runnin' like a mad steer. Jee! that road was hotter'n a red-hot stove!"

During the recital of this adventure Bumblepuppy's face had deepened in tint till it glowed like an iron disc in the heart of a fire. As he finished speaking, he knelt down and dipped his head into the cool, bubbling creek. Lifting up his ruddy face, a ray of sunshine, filtering through the tremulous leaves of the cottonwoods, fell full upon his chestnut curls, and each drop of water on his hair became of a sudden a gem of prismatic colour and most brilliant lustre.

" Phew—w—w ! " said Bumblepuppy. " I hope Mis' Janssen ain't feelin' as warm as I am."

VI

JASPERSON'S BEST GIRL

JASPERSON came to the ranch at the time of the March branding, and it was well understood between the contracting parties—Ajax and I of the first part, and Jasper Jasperson of the second part, all of San Lorenzo County, in the State of California—that the said Jasperson came to us as a favour, and, so to speak, under protest. For he had never worked out before, and was possessed of money in bank and some four hundred acres of good arable land which, he carefully explained to us, he was unwilling to farm himself. Indeed, his appearance bespoke the man of independent means, for he wore a diamond collar-stud—his tie was always pulled carefully down so as not to interfere with this splendid gem—and two diamond rings. In Jasperson's hot youth he had come into violent contact with a circular saw, and the saw, as he admitted, had the best of the encounter—two fingers of his left hand being left in the pit. A man of character and originality, he insisted upon wearing the rings upon his maimed hand, both upon the index finger; and once, when Ajax suggested respectfully that the diamonds would shine to better advantage upon the right hand, he retorted reasonably enough that the mutilated member "kind of needed settin' off." He seized the opportunity to ask Ajax why we wore no jewellery, and upon my brother replying that we considered diamonds out of place upon a cattle ranch, he roundly asserted that in his opinion a "gen'leman couldn't be too dressy."

During the first month he bought in San Lorenzo a resplendent black suit, and an amazing dress shirt with an ivy pattern, worked in white silk, meandering down and up the bosom. To oblige Ajax he tried on these garments in our presence, and spoke hopefully of the future, which he said was sure to bring to his wardrobe another shirt and possibly a silk hat. We took keen interest in these important matters, and assured Jasperson that it would afford us the purest pleasure to see once more a silk hat. Then Ajax indiscreetly asked if he was about to commit matrimony.

"Boys," he replied, blushing, "I'd ought to be engaged, but I ain't. Don't give me away, but I ain't got no best girl—not a one. Surprisin', yes, sir, considerin' how I'm fixed—most *sur*prisin'."

He took off his beautiful coat, and wrapped it carefully in tissue paper. We were sitting on the verandah after supper, and were well into our second pipes. The moonlight illumined the valley, but Jasperson's small delicate face was in shadow. From the creek hard by came the croaking of many frogs, from the cow pasture the shrilling of the crickets. A cool breeze from the Pacific was stirring the leaves of the willows and cottonwoods, and the wheat, now two feet high, murmured praise and thanksgiving for the late rains. When nature is eloquent, why should a mortal refrain from speech?

"Boys," continued Jasperson; "I'm a-goin' to tell ye something; because—well, because I feel like it. I've never had no best girl!"

"Jasperson," said Ajax, "I can't believe that. What! you, a young and——"

"I ain't young," interrupted the man of independent means. "I'm nigh on to thirty-six. Don't flim-flam me, boys. I ain't young, and I ain't beautiful, but fixed up I am—dressy, an' that should count."

"It does count," said my brother, emphatically. "I've seen you, Jasperson, on Sundays, when I couldn't take my eyes off you. The girls must be crazy."

"The girls, gen'lemen, air all right; the trouble ain't with them. It's with me. Don't laugh: it ain't no laughin' matter. Boys—I'm bashful. That's what ails Jasper Jasperson. The girls," he cried scornfully; "you bet they know a soft snap when they see it, and I am a soft snap, an' don't you forget it!

"I left my own land," he continued dreamily, in a soft, melancholy voice, "because there ain't a lady within fifteen miles o' my barn, and here there's a village, and——"

"Her name, please," said Ajax, with authority; "you must tell us her name."

"Wal," he bent forward, and his face came out of the shadows; we could see that his pale blue eyes, red-rimmed and short-sighted, were suffused with tender light, and his pendulous lower lip was a-quiver with emotion; even the hair of his head—tow-coloured and worn *à la Pompadour*—seemed to bristle with excitement, "Wal," he whispered "it's—it's Miss Birdie Dutton!"

In the silence that followed I could see Ajax pulling his moustache. Miss Birdie Dutton! Why, in the name of the Sphinx, should Jasperson have selected out of a dozen young ladies far more eligible Miss Birdie Dutton? She was our postmistress, a tall, dark, not uncomely virgin of some thirty summers. But, alas! one of her eyes was fashioned out of glass; her nose was masculine and masterful; and her chin most positive. Jasperson's chin was equally conspicuous—negatively. Miss Birdie, be it added, was a frequent contributor to the columns of the *San Lorenzo Banner*, and Grand

Secretary of a local temperance organisation. She boarded with the Swiggarts ; and Mr. Swiggart, better known as Old Smarty, told me in confidence that "she wouldn't stand no foolishness" ; and he added, reflectively, that she was something of a "bull-dozer." I knew that Old Smarty had sold his boarder an aged and foundered bronco for fifty dollars, and that within twenty-four hours the animal had been returned to him and the money refunded to Miss Birdie. Many persons had suffered grievously at the hands of Mr. Swiggart, but none, saving Miss Dutton, could boast of beating him in a horse-deal.

Presently I expressed surprise that Jasperson had the honour of Miss Dutton's unofficial acquaintance.

"I was interdooced last fall," said our friend, "at a candy-pullin' up to Mis' Swiggart's. Not that Miss Birdie was a-pullin' candy. No, sir ; she ain't built that a way, but she was settin' there kind of scornful, but smilin' An' later she an' me sung some hymns together. Mebbe, gen'lemen, ye've heard Miss Birdie sing ? "

I shook my head regretfully, but Ajax spoke enthusiastically of the lady's powers as a vocalist. He had previously described her voice to me as "a full choke, warranted to kill stone-dead at sixty yards."

"It is a lovely voice," sighed Jasperson, "strong, an' full, an' rich. Why, there ain't an organ in the county can down her high B ! " Then, warmed by my brother's sympathy, he fumbled in his pocket, and found a sheet of note-paper. Upon this he had written a quatrain that he proposed to read to us *au clair de la lune*. The lines were addressed : "To My Own Blackbird."

"She's a pernounced brunette," explained the poet ; "and her name is Birdie. I thought some of entitlin' the pome : 'To a Mocking Bird' ; but

I surmised that would sound too pussonal. She has mocked me, an' others, more'n once."

He sighed, still smarting at the memory of a gibe; then he recited the following in an effective monotone :—

"Oh! scorn not the humble worm, proud bird,
As you sing i' the top o' the tree;
Though doomed to squirm i' the ground, unheard,
He'll make a square meal for thee."

"It ain't Shakespeare," murmured the bard, "but the idee is O.K."

My brother commended the lines as lacking neither rhyme nor reason, but he questioned the propriety of alluding to a lady's appetite, and protested strongly against the use of that abject word—worm. He told Jasperson that in comparing himself to a reptile he was slapping the cheeks of his progenitors.

"But I do feel like a worm when Miss Birdie's around," objected the man of acres. "It may be ondignified, but that there eye of hers does make me wiggle."

"It's a thousand pities," said I softly, "that Miss Dutton has only one eye."

Jasperson wouldn't agree with me. He replied, with ardour, that he would never have dared to raise his two blue orbs to Miss Dutton's brilliant black one, unless he had been conscious that his mistress, like himself, had suffered mutilation.

"I'm two fingers short," he concluded, "an' she's lackin' an eye. That, gen'lemen, makes it a stand-off. Say, shall I send her this yere pome?"

"Most certainly not," said Ajax.

"Then for the Lord's sake, post me."

I touched Ajax with my foot, and coughed discreetly; for I knew my brother's weakness. He is a spendthrift in the matter of giving advice. If Jasperson had appealed to me, the elder and more experienced, I should have begged politely, but emphatically, to be excused from interference. I hold that a man and a maid must settle their love affairs without help from a third party. Ajax, unhappily, thinks otherwise.

"Miss Dutton," he began, tentatively, "is aware, Jasperson, of your—er—passion for her?"

"She ain't no sech a thing," said the lover.

"Yet her eye," continued Ajax, "is keen—keen and penetrating."

"It's a peach," cried the enthusiastic poet. "There ain't another like it in the land, but it can't see in the dark; an', boys, I've not shown my hand—yet!"

"You've made no advances directly or indirectly?"

"Not a one. By golly! I—I dassn't. I jest didn't know how. I ain't up to the tricks. You air, of course; but I'm not."

My brother somewhat confusedly hastened to assure Jasperson that his knowledge of the sex was quite elementary, and gleaned for the most part from a profound study of light literature.

The poet grinned derisively. "You ain't no tenderfoot," he said. "I reckon that what you don't know about the girls ain't worth picklin'."

"Well, if you mean business," said Ajax didactically, "if nothing we can say or do will divert your mind from courtship and matrimony—if, my dear Jasperson, you are prepared to exchange the pleasant places, the sunny slopes, and breezy freedom of bachelor life for the thorny path that leads to the altar, and thence to—er—the cradle, if, in short, you are determined to own a best girl, why, then the first and obvious thing to do is to let her know discreetly that you're in love with her."

"As how?" said Jasperson, breathlessly. "I told ye that when she was around I felt like a worm."

"You spoke of wiggling," replied my brother;

"and I suppose that heretofore you have wiggled *from* and not *to* the bird. Next time, wiggle up, my boy—as close as possible."

"You're dead right," murmured the disciple; "but look at here: when I call on Miss Birdie, she sez, 'Mister Jasperson,' or, mebbe, 'Mister Jasper, please be seated, an' let me take your hat.' Naterally, boys, I take the chair she p'ints out, an' then, dog-gone it! she takes *another*."

"Do you expect this young lady to sit down in your lap, sir? Maids, Jasperson, must not be lightly put to confusion. They must be stalked, and when at bay wooed with tender words and languishing glances. Now listen to me. Next Sunday, when you call upon Miss Dutton, take the chair she offers, but as soon as a suitable opportunity presents itself, ask to see the album. Thus you will cleverly betray a warm interest in her by showing a lively interest in her people. And to look over an album two persons must——"

"You bet they must," interrupted the poet. "They must nestle up. That's right! What kind of a chump am I not to have thought of that before? Yes, boys, she's got an album, a beaut', too: crimson plush an' nickel. And, of course, the pictures of her folks is inside. By gum! I'll give the homeliest of 'em sech a send-off as——"

"You will not," said Ajax. "Remember, Jasperson, that a burning black eye indicates jealousy, which you must beware of arousing. Don't praise too wantonly the beauty of Miss Dutton's sisters and cousins; but if the father is well-looking, pay your mistress the compliment of saying that the children of true lovers always take after the father. In turning the leaves of the album you might touch her hand, quite accidentally. No less an authority than Mr. Pickwick commends a respectful pressure."

"I'll do it," exclaimed Jasperson, "I'll do it, sure!"

"Has she a pretty hand?" I asked.

"Has she a pretty hand!" echoed the lover, in disdainful tones, "She has the hand of a queen! The Empress of Roosia ain't got a whiter nor a finer hand! Miss Birdie ain't done no harder work than smackin' a kid that needs it."

"I've heard," said I, "that she can smack—hard."

"An' I'd be a liar if I denied it," replied Jasperson. "Wal, gen'lemen, I'm obligated to ye. Next Sabbath I'll wade right in."

Upon the following Sunday our hero rose betimes, tubbed himself, shaved himself, perfumed his small person with bergamot, and then arrayed it in the ivy-bosomed shirt and the $75 suit of broadcloth. His toilet occupied just two hours and seventeen minutes. Ajax decorated the lapel of his coat with a handsome rosebud, and then the impatient swain tied round his neck a new white silk handkerchief, mounted his horse, and betook himself at a gallop to the village church. Ajax remarked with regret that the pace was too hot at the start, and feared that our colt would finish badly. As we walked back to the verandah, I told my brother that he had assumed a big responsibility; for I was convinced that Miss Dutton, albeit possessed of many admirable qualities, was not the woman to make little Jasperson either happy or comfortable. She, doubtless, being a wise bird, would greedily snap up this nice worm who had waxed fat in the richest soil. But how would the worm fare when swallowed up and absorbed?

At five that afternoon the amorous poet rode slowly up to the corral. As he sat limply upon his sorrel horse, smiling dismally at Ajax, we could see that the curl was out of his moustache, and out of the brim of his sombrero; upon his delicate face was inscribed failure.

"Boys," said he, throwing one leg over the horn of the saddle; "I didn't get there. I—I mired down!"

Later, he gave us some interesting details. It transpired that he had met his sweetheart, after Sabbath-school, and had sat beside her during the regular service; after church he had accepted a warm invitation from Mrs. Swiggart to join the family circle at dinner. At table he had been privileged to supply Miss Birdie with many dainties: pickled cucumbers, cup-custards, and root beer. He told us frankly that he had marked nothing amiss with the young lady's appetite, but that for his part he had made a sorry meal.

"My swaller," he said plaintively, "was in kinks before the boolyon was served."

"You say," murmured Ajax," that Miss Dutton's appetite was good?"

"It was just grand," replied the unhappy bard. "I never seen a lady eat cup-custards with sech relish."

"We may infer, then," observed my brother, "that Miss Birdie is still in happy ignorance of your condition; otherwise pity for you would surely have tempered that craving for cup-custards."

"I dun'no', boys, about that. Me an' Miss Birdie sung out o' the same hynm book, and—and I sort o' showed down. I reckon she knows what ails Jasper Jasperson."

Ajax unwisely congratulated the lovelorn one upon this piece of news. He said that the Rubicon was now passed, and retreat impossible. We noted the absence of the rosebud, and Jasperson blushingly confessed that he had presented the flower to his best girl after dinner, an act of homage—so we presumed—in recognition of the lady's contempt of danger in mixing pickled cucumbers with cup-custards.

"After that," said Jasperson, "I thought of the album, an' 'twas then my feet begun to get cold. But I up and as't to see it, as bold as a coyote in a hen-roost. Then she sez, kind of soft an' smilin': 'Why, Mister Jasper, what d'you want to see my album for? you don't know my folks.'"

"A glorious opportunity," said Ajax. "What did you reply, my buck?"

"Dog-gone it! I'd ought to have sailed right in, but I sot there, shiverin', an' said: 'Oh! because . . .' jest like a school-girl. And I could see that the answer made her squirm. She must ha' thought I was the awflest fool. But to save me that's all I could stammer out—'Oh, because . . .'"

"Well," said Ajax, encouragingly, "the best of us may be confounded in love and war."

"You do put heart into a man," murmured the little fellow. "Wal, sir, we sot down an' looked through the album. And on the first page was Miss Birdie's father, the mortician and arterialist."

"The what?" we exclaimed.

"Undertaker and *em*-bammer. He's an expert, too. Why, Miss Birdie was a-tellin' me——"

I ventured to interrupt him. "I don't think, Jasperson, I should like an undertaker for a father-in-law. Have you considered that point?"

"I have, gen'lemen. It might come in mighty handy. Wal, he was the homeliest critter I ever seen. I dassn't ring in that little song an' dance you give me. And on the nex' page was Mis' Dutton." He sighed softly and looked upward.

"The mother," said Ajax briskly. "Now, I dare swear that she's a good-looking woman. Nature attends to such matters. Beauty often marries the b—— the homely man."

"Mis' Dutton," said Jasperson solemnly, "is now a-singing in the heavenly choir, an' bein' dead I can't say nothing; but, gen'lemen, ye'll understand me when I tell ye that Miss Birdie never got her fine looks from her maw. Not on your life!"

" Doubtless," said Ajax sympathetically, " there was something in the faces of Miss Dutton's parents that outweighed the absence of mere beauty: intelligence, intellect, character."

" The old man's forehead is kind o' lumpy," admitted Jasperson, " but I didn't use that. I sot there, as I say, a-shiverin', an' never opened my face. She then showed me her cousins: daisies they were and no mistake; but I minded what you said, an' when Miss Birdie as't me if they wasn't beauties, I sez no—not even good-lookin'; an', by golly! she got mad, an' when I tetched her hand, obedient to orders, she pulled it away as if a tarantula had stung it. After that I made tracks for the barn. I tell ye, gen'lemen, I'm not put up right for love-makin'."

Ajax puffed at his pipe, deep in thought. I could see that he was affected by the miscarriage of his counsels. Presently he removed the briar from his lips, and said abruptly: " Jasperson, you assert that you showed down in church. What d'you mean by that? Tell me exactly what passed."

The man we believed to be a laggard in love answered confusedly that he and Miss Dutton had been singing that famous hymn, " We shall meet in the sweet By-and-by." The congregation were standing, but resumed their seats at the end of the hymn. Under cover of much scraping of feet and rustling of starched petticoats, Jasperson had assured his mistress that the sweet By-and-by was doubtless a very pleasant place, but that he hoped to meet her often in the immediate future. He told us that Miss Birdie had very properly taken no notice whatsoever of this communication; whereupon he had repeated it, lending emphasis to what was merely a whisper by a sly pressure of the elbow. This, too, the lady had neither approved nor resented.

Upon this Ajax assured our friend that he need not despair, and he said that the vexed question of the fair's appetite had been set at rest: a happy certainty was the sauce that had whetted her hunger. Jasperson listened with sparkling eyes.

"Say," said he; "if you'll help me out, I'll write a letter to Miss Birdie this very night."

I frowned and expostulated in vain. Within two minutes, pens, ink and paper were produced, and both Jasperson and my brother were hard at work. Between them the following composition was produced. Jasperson furnished the manner, Ajax the matter.

"To Miss Birdie Dutton.

"Dear Friend,—Since leaving you this afternoon, *more abrupt than a gentleman could wish*, I have taken up my pen to set forth that which is in my heart, but which cannot leave my trembling lips. Dear friend, there is too much *at steak* for me to be calm in your presence. When I sat by your side, and gazed with you at the noble faces of your parents, reading there, dear friend, the names of those great qualities which have been inherited by you, *with queenly beauty thrown in*, then it was that a sudden sinking inside robbed your lover of his powers of speech. And how could I see the loveliness of your cousins when my eyes were dwelling with rapture upon the stately form of her I trust to call my own? Be mine, dear friend, for I love you and hope to marry you, to part neither here nor in the sweet By-and-by.

"Yours respectfully,
"Jasper Jasperson.

"P.S.—*Important*. The ranch is four hundred and three acres, *paid for*. And there's money somewhere to build a nice residence, and to furnish it according to Hoyle. We'd keep a hired girl.

"P.P.S.—*And a pianner*. J. J. (*A true lover*)."

This billet-doux was sealed and despatched, and in due time brought an acceptance. The engagement was formally ratified at a banquet given by the Swiggarts, and the health of the high contracting parties was enthusiastically drunk in pink lemonade. The marriage was arranged to take place during the summer vacation, and Pacific Grove was selected as the best spot in California for the honeymoon.

Thus smoothly for a season ran the course of true love. But three weeks later, when the landscape was wearing its imperial livery of lupin and eschscholtizia, when the fields at night were white with moonflowers, when a glorious harvest was assured, and all beasts and birds and insects were garrulous of love and love's delight—upon May-day, in short—was disclosed a terrible rift within poor Jasperson's lute.

He had escorted his sweetheart to the annual picnic, and returning late at night found Ajax and me enjoying a modest nightcap before turning in. We asked him to join us, but he refused with some asperity, and upon cross-examination confessed that he had promised Miss Dutton to take the pledge at the next meeting of the lodge. Now, we knew that Jasperson was the pink of sobriety, but one who appreciated an occasional glass of beer, or even a mild cocktail ; and we had heard him more than once denounce the doctrines of the Prohibitionists ; so we were quite convinced that meek submission to the dictates of the Grand Secretary of Corona Lodge was both unnecessary and inexpedient. And we said so.

"Birdie knows I don't drink," stammered our hired man, "but she thinks I'd ought to take the pledge as an example."

"An example," echoed Ajax. "To whom? To *us?*"

"She said an example, gen'lemen, jest—an example."

"But she meant us," said Ajax sternly. "Our names were mentioned. Don't you deny it, Jasperson."

"They was," he admitted reluctantly. "She as't me, careless-like, if you didn't drink wine with your meals, and I said yes. I'd ought to have said no."

"What!" cried my brother, smiting the table till the decanter and glasses reeled. "You think that you ought to have lied on our account. Jasperson—I'm ashamed of you; I tremble for your future as the slave of Miss Dutton."

"Wal—I didn't lie," said Jasperson defiantly; "I up and told her the truth: that you had beer for supper, and claret wine, or mebbe sherry wine, or mebbe both for dinner, and that you took a toddy when you felt like it, an' that there was champagne down cellar, an' foreign liquors in queer bottles, an' Scotch whisky, an' *—everything*. She as't questions and I answered them—like an idiot! Gen'lemen, the shame you feel for me is discounted by the shame I feel for myself. I'd ought to have told Birdie that your affairs didn't concern her; I'd ought to have said that you was honnerable gen'lemen whom I'm proud to call my intimate friends; I'd ought to have said a thousand things, but I sot there, and said—nothin'!"

He was standing as he spoke, emphasising his periods with semaphoric motions of his right arm. When he had finished he sank quite overcome upon the big divan, and covered his flushed face with a pair of small hands. He was profoundly moved, and Ajax appeared less solidly complacent than usual. I reflected, not without satisfaction, that I had done what I could to keep Jasperson and the Grand Secretary apart.

"This is very serious," said Ajax, after a significant pause. "I—I feel, Jasperson, that this engagement was brought about by—me."

"It's a fact," assented our hired man. "And that's what makes me feel so mean right now. Boys, I love that woman so that I dassn't go agin her."

Ajax rose in his might and confronted the trembling figure upon the divan. My brother's nickname was given to him at school in virtue of his great size and strength. Standing now above Jasperson, his proportions seemed even larger than usual. The little dandy in his smug black garments with his diamond stud gleaming in the ivy-bosomed shirt (his rings had been given to Miss Birdie), with his features wilting like the wild pansies in the lapel of his coat, dwindled to an amorphous streak beneath the keen glance of my burly brother.

"Do you really love her?" said Ajax, in his deepest bass. "Or do you *fear* her, Jasperson? Answer honestly."

The small man writhed. "I dun'no'," he faltered at last. "By golly! I dun'no'."

"Then I do know," replied my brother incisively: "you've betrayed yourself, Jasperson. You're playing the worm. D'you hear? The *worm!* I once advised you to wiggle up to the bird, now I tell you solemnly to wiggle away, before it's too late. I've been a fool, and so have you. For the past three weeks I've had my eye on you, and I suspected that you'd fallen a victim to an ambitious and unscrupulous woman. You've lost weight, man; and you've no flesh to spare. Marry Miss Dutton, and you'll be a scarecrow within a year, and require the services of the mortician within two! I got you into this infernal scrape, and, by Heaven! I'll get you out of it."

"But what will the neighbours say?" stammered Jasperson, sitting upright. At my brother's words his pendulous nether lip had stiffened, and now his pale blue eyes were quickening with hope and vitality. He arranged his white satin tie, that had slipped to one side, and smoothed nervously the nap of the broadcloth pants, while Ajax clad in rough grey flannels took a turn up and down our sitting-room.

My brother and I had lived together for many years, years of fat kine and years of lean, but I couldn't recall a single instance when he had considered the opinion of Mrs. Grundy. In coming to California, to a rough life on a cattle ranch, we had virtually snapped our fingers beneath the dame's nose. I mention this because it sheds light upon what follows.

"The neighbours, Jasperson," replied Ajax, "will say some deuced unpleasant things. But I think I can promise you the sympathy of the men, and your ranch is fifteen miles from a petticoat."

"I dassn't break it off, gen'lemen, not by word of mouth; but—but we might write."

"And lay yourself open to a breach of promise case and heavy damages. No—I've a better plan than that. We'll make Miss Dutton release you. She shall do the writing this time."

"Boys," said Jasperson solemnly, "she'll never do it—never! Her mind is sot on merridge. I see it all now. She hypnotised me, by golly! I swear she did! That eye of hers is a corker."

"What night are you to be initiated?" asked Ajax, with seeming irrelevance.

"Next Toosday," replied the neophyte nervously.

"You have never, I believe, been on a spree?"

"Never, gen'lemen—never."

"They tell me," said Ajax softly, "that our village whisky, the sheep-herders' delight, will turn a pet lamb into a roaring lion."

"It's pizon," said Jasperson,—"jest pizon."

"You, Jasperson, need a violent stimulant. On Tuesday afternoon, my boy, you and I will go on a mild spree. I don't like sprees any more than you do, but I see no other way of cutting this knot.

Now, mark me, not a word to Miss Dutton. It's late, so—good-night."

Between May-day and the following Tuesday but little transpired worth recording. Miss Dutton sent the convert a bulky package of tracts, with certain scathing passages marked—obviously for our benefit—in red ink; and we learned from Alethea-Belle that the initiation of Jasper Jasperson was to be made an occasion of much rejoicing, and that an immense attendance was expected at Corona Lodge. The storekeeper asked Ajax outright if there were truth in the rumour that we were to be decorated with the blue ribbon, and my brother hinted mysteriously that even stranger things than that might happen. Jasperson complained of insomnia, but he said several times that he would never forget what Ajax was doing on his behalf, and I don't think he ever will. For my part I maintained a strict neutrality. Ethically considered, I was sensible that my brother's actions were open to severe criticism; at the same time, I was certain that mild measures would not have prevailed.

The Grand Secretary, while I was in the post-office, invited me quite informally to participate in the opening exercises, and to assist at the banquet, the benediction, so to speak, of the secret rites. She said that other prominent gentlemen would receive invitations, and that she was certain the "work" would please and edify. She expressed much chagrin when I tendered my regret, and amazed me by affirming that Ajax had cordially consented to be present. This I considered an outrageous breach of good manners upon his part: if he kept his promise, a number of most worthy and respectable persons would consider themselves insulted; so I advised Miss Birdie not to count upon him.

"I like your big brother," she said, in her hard, metallic tones; "he is such a man: he has made quite a conquest of me; for mercy's sake don't tell him so."

I pledged myself to profound secrecy, but walking home the remembrance of an uncanny gleam in her bold black eye put to flight my misgivings. I decided that Ajax was justified in using "pizon."

Upon Tuesday afternoon I deemed it expedient to remain at the ranch-house. About five, Jasperson, arrayed in his best, accompanied Ajax to the village. The lodge was to open its doors at 7.30; and at ten my brother returned alone, breathless and red in the face, the bearer of extraordinary tidings. I shall let him tell the story in his own words.

"The whole village," said he, "has been painted by Jasperson a lovely pigeon-blood red!" Then he sat down and laughed in the most uncontrollable and exasperating manner.

"By Jupiter!" he gasped; "I knew that whisky was wonderful stuff, but I never believed it could turn a worm into a Malay running amok." Then he laughed again till the tears rolled down his cheeks.

Between the gusts and gurgles of laughter a few more details leaked out. I present them connectedly. The kind reader will understand that allowance must be made for my brother. He is a seasoned vessel, but no man can drink our village nectar with impunity.

"Of course," he began, "I knew that, this being his last day, the boys would ask Jasperson to celebrate. So, mindful, of your precious reputation—I don't care a hang about my own—I kept in the background. Upon inquiry you'll find that it is generally conceded that I did my best to prevent what has happened. And Jasperson was foxey, too. He hung back, said he was going to join the lodge, and wouldn't indulge in anything stronger than Napa Soda. He had three rounds of that.

VII

FIFTEEN FAT STEERS

" UNCLE JAKE says," murmured Ajax, " that Laban Swiggart has been ' milking ' us ever since we bought this ranch."

Laban was our neighbour. A barbed-wire fence divided his sterile hills from our fertile valleys, and emphasised sharply the difference between a Government claim and a Spanish grant. The County Assessor valued the Swiggart ranch at the rate of *one*, and our domain at *six* dollars per acre. We owned two leagues of land, our neighbours but half a section. Yet, in consequence of dry seasons and low prices, we were hardly able to pay our bills, whereas the Swiggarts confounded all laws of cause and effect by living in comparative splendour and luxury.

" Uncle Jake believes that he stole our steers," continued Ajax, puffing slowly at his pipe.

Some two years before we had lost fifteen fat steers. We had employed Laban to look for them, and he had charged us thirty dollars for labours that were in vain.

" Ajax," said I, " we have eaten the Swiggarts' salt, not to mention their fatted chicks, their pickled peaches, their jams and jellies. It's an outrage to insinuate, as you do, that these kind neighbours are common thieves."

My brother looked quite distressed. " Of course Mrs. Swiggart can know nothing about it. She is a real good sort ; the best wife and mother in the county. And I'm only quoting Uncle Jake. He says that fifteen steers at $30 a head make $450. Laban built a barn that spring, and put up a tank and windmill."

With this Parthian shot my brother left me to some sorry reflections. I cordially liked and respected Laban Swiggart and his family. He had married a Skenk. No name in our county smelled sweeter than Skenk: a synonym, indeed, for piety, deportment, shell-work, and the preserving of fruits. The Widow Skenk lived in San Lorenzo, hard by the Congregational Church; and it was generally conceded that the hand of one of her daughters in marriage was a certificate of character to the groom. No Skenk had been known to wed a drunkard, a blasphemer, or an evil liver. Moreover, Laban had been the first to welcome us—two raw Englishmen—to a country where inexperience is a sin. He had helped us over many a stile; he had saved us many dollars. And he had an honest face. Broad, benignant brows surmounted a pair of keen and kindly eyes; his nose proclaimed a sense of humour; his mouth and chin were concealed by a beard almost apostolic in its silky beauty. Could such a man be a thief?

The very next day Laban rode down his steep slopes and asked us to help him and his to eat a Christmas turkey. He said something, too, about a fine ham, and a "proposition," a money-making scheme, to be submitted to us after the banquet.

"Hard times are making you rich," said Ajax.

"My God!" he exclaimed passionately, "have I not been poor long enough? Have I not seen my wife and children suffering for want of proper food and clothing? If prosperity is coming my way, boys, I've paid the price for it, and don't you forget it."

His eyes were suffused with tears, and Ajax took note of it. My brother told me later that so tender a husband and father was assuredly no cattle-thief.

Upon Christmas Day we sat at meat for nearly two hours. Mrs. Doctor Tapper, the wife of the stout dentist of San Miguelito, was present. Of the three Misses Skenk she had made the best match—from a worldly point of view. She wore diamonds ; she kept two hired girls ; she entertained on a handsome scale, and never failed to invite her less fortunate sisters to her large and select parties—she was, in a word, a most superior person, and a devout church-member. To this lady Ajax made himself mightily agreeable.

" Now really," said she, " I do wish the doctor was here. He does so dearly love badinage. That, and bridgework, is his forte."

" And why isn't he here ? " demanded my brother.

" He's hunting our bay mare. It broke out of the barn this morning. I told him that I wouldn't disappoint Alviry for an ark full of bay mares. I knew she would count on me to help her entertain you gentlemen."

" I hope your husband will find his mare," said Ajax. " We lost fifteen fat steers once, but we never found them."

" That's so," observed Mr. Swiggart. " And I wore myself out a-hunting 'em. They was stolen—sure."

" The wickedness of some folk passes my understanding," remarked Mrs. Tapper. " Well, we're told that the triumphing of the wicked is short, but—good Land !—Job never lived in this State."

" He'd been more to home in New England," said Laban slily. The Skenks were from Massachusetts, the Swiggarts from Illinois.

" There's a pit digged for such," continued Mrs. Tapper, ignoring the interruption, " a pit full o' brimstone and fire. Yes, sister, I will take one more slice of the ham. I never ate sweeter meat. Eastern, I presume, my dear?"

"No, sister. Laban cured that ham. Pork-packing was his trade back east."

Laban added: "Boys, I hope ye like that ham. I've a reason for asking."

We assured our host that the ham was superlatively good. Mince and pumpkin pies followed, coffee, then grace. As we rose from the table, Laban said pleasantly, "Boys, here are some imported cigars. We'll smoke outside."

Having, so to speak, soaped the ways, Mr. Swiggart launched his "proposition." He wished to pack bacon. Hogs, he pointed out, were selling at two cents a pound; bacon and hams at twelve and fifteen cents. We had some two hundred and fifty hogs ready for market. These Laban wanted to buy on credit. He proposed to turn them into lard, hams, and bacon, to sell the same to local merchants (thereby saving cost of transportation), and to divide the profits with us after the original price of the hogs was paid. This seemed a one-sided bargain. He was to do all the work; we should, in any case, get the market price for the hogs, while the profits were to be divided. However, our host explained that we took all the risk. If the bacon spoiled he would not agree to pay us a cent. With the taste of that famous ham in our mouths, this contingency seemed sufficiently remote; and we said as much.

"Well, I could rob ye right and left. Ye've got to trust me, and there's a saying: 'To trust is to bust.'"

He was so candid in explaining the many ways by which an unscrupulous man might take advantage of two ignorant Britons, that Ajax, not relishing the personal flavour of the talk, rose and strolled across to the branding-corral. When he returned he was unusually silent, and, riding home, he said thoughtfully: "I saw Laban's brand this afternoon. It is 81, and the 8 is the same size as our S. His ear-mark is a crop, which obliterates our swallow-fork. Queer—eh?"

"Not at all," I replied indignantly. "It's a social crime to eat, as you did to-day, three large helpings of turkey, and then——"

"Bosh!" he interrupted. "If Laban is an honest man, no harm has been done. If he stole our steers—and, mind you, I don't say he did—three slices off the breast of a turkey will hardly offset my interest in five tons of beef. As for this packing scheme, it sounds promising; but we lack figures. To-morrow we will drive into San Lorenzo, and talk to the Children of Israel. If Ikey Rosenbaum says that bacon is likely to rise or stay where it is, we will accept Laban's proposition."

The following morning we started early. The short cut to San Lorenzo lay through the Swiggart claim, and the road passed within a few yards of the house. We saw Mrs. Swiggart on the verandah, and offered to execute any commissions that she cared to entrust to two bachelors. In reply she said that she hated to ask favours, but—if we were going to town in a two-seater, would we be so very kind as to bring back her mother, Mrs. Skenk, who was ailing, and in need of a change. "Gran'ma's hard on the springs," observed Euphemia, Mrs. Swiggart's youngest girl, "but she'll tell you more stories than you can shake a stick at; not 'bout fairies, Mr. Ajax, but reel folks." We assured Mrs. Swiggart that we should esteem it a pleasure to give her mother a lift. Ajax had met the old lady at a church social some six months before, and, finding her a bonanza of gossip, had extracted some rich and curious ore.

In San Lorenzo we duly found Isaac Rosenbaum, who proved an optimist on the subject of bacon.

Indeed, he chattered so glibly of rising prices and better times that the packing scheme was immediately referred to his mature judgment; and he not only recommended it heartily, but offered to handle our "stuff" on commission, or to buy it outright if it proved marketable. According to Ikey the conjunction "if" could not be ignored. Packing bacon beneath the sunny skies of Southern California was a speculation, he said. Swiggart, he added, ought to know what good hams were, for he bought the very best Eastern brand.

"What!" we cried simultaneously, "does Mr. Swiggart *buy* hams?"

Yes; it seemed that only a few days previously Laban had carefully selected the choicest ham in the store.

Ajax clutched my arm, and we fled.

"We have convicted the wretch," he said presently.

"The *wretches*," I amended.

The use of the plural smote him in the face. "This is awful," he groaned. "Why, when you were away last summer, and I broke my leg, she nursed me like a mother."

"Women throw such sops to a barking conscience."

I was positive now that Laban had stolen the steers, and that his wife was privy to the theft. The lie about the ham had been doubtless concocted for purposes of plunder. The kindness and hospitality of our neighbours had been, after all, but a snare for tenderfeet.

. . . .

We found Mrs. Skenk—whom we had seen on arrival—sitting on her front porch, satchel in hand, patiently awaiting us. Ajax helped her to mount—no light task, for she was a very heavy and enfeebled woman. I drove. As we trotted down the long straggling street our passenger spoke with feeling of the changes that had taken place in the old mission town.

"I've lived here thirty years. Twenty mighty hard ones as a married woman; and ten tol'able easy ones as a widder. Mr. Skenk was a saintly man, but tryin' to live with on account o' deefness and the azmy. I never see a chicken took with the gapes but I think o' Abram Skenk. Yes, Mr. Ajax, my daughters was all born here, 'ceptin' Alviry. She was born in Massachusetts. It did make a difference to the child. As a little girl she kep' herself to herself. And though I'd rather cut out my tongue than say a single word against Laban Swiggart, I do feel that he'd no business to pick the best in the basket. Favourite? No, sir; but I've said, many a time, that if Alviry went to her long home, I could not tarry here. Most women feel that way about the first-born. I've told Alviry to her face as she'd ought to have said 'No' to Laban Swiggart. Oh, the suffering that dear child has endured! It did seem till lately as if horse-tradin', cattle-raisin', and the butcher business was industries against which the Lord had set his face. Sairy married an undertaker; Samanthy *couldn't* refuse Doctor Tapper. And, rain or shine, folks must have teeth if they want to eat the steaks they sell in Californy, and likewise they must have caskets when their time comes. Yes, Alviry does take after me, Mr. Ajax. You're reel clever to say so. She ain't a talker, but brainy. You've seen her wax flowers? Yes; and the shell table with 'Bless our Home' on it, in pink cowries? Mercy sakes! There's a big storm a'comin' up."

The rain began to fall as she spoke; at first lightly, then more heavily as we began to cross the mountains. Long before we came to the Salinas River it was pouring down in torrents—an inch of water to the hour.

"It's a cloud-burst," said Mrs. Skenk, from beneath a prehistoric umbrella. "This'll flush the creeks good."

I whipped up the horses, thinking of the Salinas and its treacherous waters. In California, when the ground is well sodden, a very small storm will create a very big freshet. At such times most rivers are dangerous to ford on account of quicksands.

"I'll guess we'll make it," observed the old lady. "I've crossed when it was bilin' from bank to bank. I mind me when Jim Tarburt was drowned: No 'count, Jim. He'd no more sense than a yaller dog. 'Twas a big streak o' luck for his wife and babies, for Susannah Tarburt married old man Hopping, and when he died the very next year she was left rich. Then there was that pore thin school-marm, Ireen Bunker. She——"

And Mrs. Skenk continued with a catalogue, long as that of the ships in the *Iliad*, of travellers who, in fording the Salinas, had crossed that other grim river which flows for ever between time and eternity. We had reached the banks before she had drained her memory of those who had perished.

"'Tis bilin'," she muttered, as she peered up and down the yellow, foam-speckled torrent that roared defiance at us; "but, good Land! we can't go around now. Keep the horses' noses upstream, young man, and use your whip."

We plunged in.

What followed took place quickly. In mid-stream the near horse floundered into a quicksand and fell, swinging round the pole, and with it the off horse. I lashed the poor struggling beasts unmercifully, but the wagon settled slowly down—inch by inch. Death grinned us in the teeth. Then I heard Mrs. Skenk say, quite collectedly: "'Tis my fault, and my weight." Then Ajax roared out: "For God's sake, sit down, ma'am, sit down. SIT DOWN!" he screamed, his voice shrill above the bellowing, booming waters. A crash behind told me that he had flung her back into her seat. At the same moment the near horse found a footing; there was a mighty pull from both the terrified animals, the harness held, and the danger was over. When we reached the bank I looked round. Mrs. Skenk was smiling; Ajax was white as chalk.

"She w-w-would have s-s-sacrificed her l-l-life," he stammered. "If I hadn't grabbed her, she would be dead this minute."

"I reckon that's so," assented our passenger. "I took a notion to jump. My weight and fool advice was like to cost three lives. Better one, thinks I, than three. You saved my life, Mr. Ajax. Yes, you did. Alviry, I reckon, will thank you."

The rest of the journey was accomplished in silence. We drove up to the Swiggarts' house, and both Laban and his wife expressed great surprise at seeing us.

"You're wet through, mother," said Mrs. Swiggart, "and all of a tremble."

"Yes, Alviry, I've had a close call. This young man saved my life."

"Nonsense," said Ajax gruffly. "I did nothing of the sort, Mrs. Skenk."

"Yes, you did," she insisted, grimly obstinate.

"Any ways," said Mrs. Swiggart, "you'll lose what has been saved, mother, if you stand there in the rain."

For five days it rained steadily. Our creek, which for eleven months in the year bleated sweetly at the foot of the garden, bellowed loudly as any bull of Bashan, and kept us prisoners in the house, where we had leisure to talk and reflect. We had been robbed and humbugged, injured in pride and pocket, but the lagging hours anointed our wounds. Philosophy touched us with healing finger.

"If we prosecute we advertise our own greenness," said Ajax. "After all, if Laban did fleece us, he kept at bay other ravening wolves. And there is Mrs. Skenk. That plucky old soul must never hear the story. It would kill her."

So we decided to charge profit and loss with five hundred dollars, and to keep our eyes peeled for the future. By this time the skies had cleared, and the cataract was a creek again. The next day Mrs. Swiggart drove up to the barn, tied her horse to the hitching-post, and walked with impressive dignity up the garden path. We had time to note that something was amiss. Her dark eyes, beneath darker brows, intensified a curious pallor—that sickly hue which is seen upon the faces of those who have suffered grievously in mind or body. Ajax opened the door, and offered her a chair, but not his hand. She did not seem to notice the discourtesy. We asked if her mother had suffered from the effects of her wetting.

"Mother has been very sick," she replied, in a lifeless voice. "She's been at death's door. For five days I've prayed to Almighty God, and I swore that if He'd see fit to spare mother, I'd come down here, and on my bended knees"—she sank on the floor—"ask for your forgiveness as well as His. Don't come near me," she entreated; "let me say what must be said in my own way. When I married Laban Swiggart I was an honest woman, though full o' pride and conceit. And he was an honest man. To-day we're thieves and liars."

"Mrs. Swiggart," said Ajax, springing forward and raising her to her feet. "You must not kneel to us. There—sit down and say no more. We know all about it, and it's blotted out so far as we're concerned."

Then he was persuaded by Jake Williams to try a glass of beer, and after that a bumper of strong, fruity port—the pure juice of the Californian grape. That warmed him up! At a quarter to six he took his first drink of whisky, and then the evil spirits of all the devils who manufacture it seemed to possess him. In less than half-an-hour he was the centre of a howling crowd, and none howled louder than he. He set up the drinks again and again. I tried to drag him away, and failed miserably. I'll be hanged if he didn't get hold of a six-shooter, and threatened to fill me with lead if I interfered. He told the boys he was going to join the lodge. That was the dominant note. He was going to join the lodge. He had come to town on purpose. How they cheered him! Then that scoundrel Jake Williams was inspired by Satan to ask him if he was provided with an initiation robe. And he actually persuaded Jasperson to remove his beautiful black clothes and to array himself in a Sonora blanket. Then they striped his poor white face with black and red paint, till he looked like an Apache. Honestly, I did my level best to quash the proceedings: I might as well have tried to bale out the Pacific with a pitchfork. At a quarter-past seven the Swiggarts drove into Paradise, and I wish you could have seen the Grand Secretary's face. She had no idea, naturally, that her Jasper was the artist so busily engaged in decorating the village. But she knew there was an awful row on, and I fancy she rather gloried in her own saintliness. Presently the lodge filled up, and I could see Miss Birdie standing on the porch looking anxiously around for the candidate. Finally I felt so sorry for the girl, that I made up my mind to give her a hint, so that she could slip quietly away. She greeted me warmly, and said that she supposed Mr. Jasperson was around 'somewheres,' and I said that he was. Then she spoke about the riot, and asked if I had seen a number of brutal cowboys abusing a poor Indian. She told me that her brothers and sisters inside the lodge were very distressed about it. And as she talked the yells grew louder, and I was convinced that the candidate was about to present himself. So I tried to explain the facts. But, confound it! she was so obtuse—for I couldn't blurt the truth right out—that, before she caught on, the procession arrived. The catechumen was seated upon an empty beer-barrel, placed upon a sort of float dragged by the boys. They had with them a big drum, that terrible bassoon of Uncle Jake's, and a cornet; the noise was something terrific. Well, Miss Birdie's a good plucked one! She stood on the steps and rebuked them. That voice of hers silenced the band. Before she was through talking you might have heard a pin drop. She rated them for a quarter of an hour, and all the good people in the lodge came out to listen and applaud. I was jammed up against her, and couldn't stir. At the end she invited them to come into the lodge to see a good man—I quote her verbatim—an upright citizen, a credit to his country and an ornament to society, take the pledge. When she stopped, Jasperson began, in that soft, silky voice of his. He thanked her, and said he was glad to know that he was held in such high esteem; that he cordially hoped the boys would come in, as he was paying for the banquet, and that after supper they might expect a real sociable time!

"That's all, but it was enough for the Grand Secretary. She gave a ghastly scream, and keeled over, right into my arms."

"And where," said I, "is Jasperson?"

"Jasperson," replied Ajax soberly, "is being removed in a spring-wagon to his own ranch. To-morrow he will be a very sick man, but I think I've got him out of his scrape."

Her sobs—the vehement, heart-breaking sobs of a man rather than of a woman—gradually ceased. She continued in a softer voice: "It began 'way back, when I was a little girl. Mother set me on a pedestal; p'r'aps I'd ought to say I set myself there. It's like me to be blaming mother. Anyways, I just thought myself a little mite cleverer and handsomer and better than the rest o' the family. I aimed to beat Sarah and Samanthy at whatever they undertook, and Satan let me do it. Well, I did one good thing. I married a poor man because I loved him. I said to myself, 'He has brains, and so have I. The dollars will come.' But they didn't come. The children came.

"Then Sarah and Samanthy married. They married men o' means, and the gall and wormwood entered into my soul, and ate it away. Laban was awful good. He laughed and worked, but we couldn't make it. Times was too hard. I'd see Samanthy trailin' silks and satins in the dust, and—and my underskirts was made o' flour sacks. Yes—flour sacks! And me a Skenk!"

She paused. Neither Ajax nor I spoke. Comedy lies lightly upon all things, like foam upon the dark waters. Beneath are tragedy and the tears of time.

"Then you gentlemen came and bought land. They said you was lords, with money to burn. I told Laban to help you in the buyin' o' horses, and cattle, and barb-wire, and groceries. He got big commissions, but he kept off the other bloodsuckers. We paid some of our debts, and Laban bought me a black silk gown. I couldn't rest till Samanthy had felt of it. She'd none better. If we'd only been satisfied with that!

"Well, that black silk made everything else look dreadful mean. 'Twas then you spoke to Laban about choosin' a brand. Satan put it into my head to say—S. It scart Laban. He was butcherin' then, and he surmised what I was after; I persuaded him 'twas for the children's sake. The first steer paid for Emanuel's baby clothes and cradle. They was finer than what Sarah bought for her child. Then we killed the others—one by one. Laban let 'em through the fence and then clapped our brand a-top o' yours. They paid for the tank and windmill. After that we robbed you when and where we could. We put up that bacon scheme meanin' to ship the stuff to the city and to tell you that it had spoiled on us. We robbed none else, only you. And we actually justified ourselves. We surmised 'twas fittin' that Britishers should pay for the support o' good Americans."

"I've read some of your histories," said Ajax drily, "and can understand that point of view."

"Satan fools them as fool themselves, Mr. Ajax. But the truth struck me and Laban when we watched by mother. She was not scared o' death. And she praised me to Laban, and said that I'd chosen the better part in marryin' a poor man for love, and that money hadn't made Christian women of Sarah and Samanthy. She blamed herself, dear soul, for settin' store overly much on dollars and cents. And she said she could die easier thinking that what was good in her had passed to me, and not what was evil. And, Mr. Ajax, that talk just drove me and Laban crazy. Well, mother ain't going to die, and we ain't neither—till we've paid back the last cent. we stole from you. Laban has figgered it out, principal and interest, and he's drawn a note for fifteen hundred dollars, which we've both signed. Here it is."

She tendered us a paper. Ajax stuck his hands into his pockets, and I did the same.

She misinterpreted the action. "You ain't going to prosecute?" she faltered.

Ajax nodded to me. Upon formal occasions he expects me, being the elder, to speak. If I say more or less than he approves I am severely taken to task.

" Mrs. Swiggart," I began, lamely enough, " I am sure that your husband can cure hams——"

Ajax looked at me indignantly. With the best of motives I had given a sore heart a grievous twist.

" We bought that ham," she said sadly, " a-purpose."

" No matter. We have decided to go into this packing business with your husband. When—er—experience goes into partnership with ignorance, ignorance expects to pay a premium. We have paid our premium."

She rose, and we held out our hands.

" No, gentlemen ; I won't take your hands till that debt is cancelled. The piano and the team will go some ways towards it. Good-bye, and—thank you."

VIII

AN EXPERIMENT

My brother and I had just ridden off the range, when Uncle Jake told us that a tramp was hanging about the corrals and wished to speak with us.

"He looks like hell," concluded Uncle Jake.

We found him, a minute later, curled up on a heap of straw on the shady side of our big barn. He got up as we approached, and stared at us with a curious derisive intentness of glance, slightly disconcerting.

"You are Englishmen," he said quietly.

The man's voice was charming, with that unmistakable quality which challenges attention even in Mayfair, and enthrals it in the wilderness. We nodded, and he continued easily: "It is late, and some twenty-six miles, so I hear, to the nearest town. May I spend the night in your barn. I don't smoke—in barns."

While he was speaking, we had time to examine him. His appearance was inexpressibly shocking. Dirty, with a ragged six weeks' growth of dark hair upon his face, out at heel and elbows, shirtless and shiftless, he seemed to have reached the nadir of misery and poverty. Obviously one of the "broken brigade," he had seemingly lost everything except his manners. His amazing absence of self-consciousness made a clown of me. I blurted out a gruff "All right," and turned on my heel, unable to face the derisive smile upon the thin, pale lips. As I walked towards the house, I heard

Ajax following me, but he did not speak till we had reached our comfortable sitting-room. Then, as gruffly as I, he said, " Humpty Dumpty—after the fall ! "

We lit our pipes in silence, sensible of an extraordinary depression in the moral atmosphere. Five minutes before we had been much elated. The spring round-up of cattle was over ; we had sold our bunch of steers at the top price ; the money lay in our small safe ; we had been talking of a modest celebration as we rode home over the foothills. Now, to use the metaphor of a cow county, we had been brought up with a sharp turn ! Our prosperity, measured by the ill-fortune of a fellow-countryman, dwindled. Ajax summed up the situation : " He made me feel cheap."

" Why ? " I asked, conscious of a similar feeling. Ajax smoked and reflected.

" It's like this," he answered presently. " That chap has been to the bottom of the pit, but he bobs up with a smile. Did you notice his smile ? "

I rang the bell for Quong, our Chinese servant. When he came in I told him to prepare a hot bath. Ajax whistled ; but as Quong went away, looking rather cross, my brother added, " Our clothes will fit him."

The bath-house was outside. Quong carried in a couple of pails full of boiling water ; we laid out shaving tackle, an old suit of grey flannel, a pair of brown shoes, and the necessary under-linen. A blue bird's-eye tie, I remember, was the last touch. Then Ajax shrugged his shoulders and said significantly, " You know what this means ? "

" Rehabilitation."

" Exactly. It may be fun for us to rig out this poor devil, but we must do more than feed and clothe him. Have you thought of that ? "

I had not, and said so.

" This is an experiment. First and last, we're going to try to raise a man from the dead. If we get him on to his pins, we'll have to supply some crutches. Are you prepared to do that?"

"If you are."

"Right! Of course, he may refuse our help. It wouldn't surprise me a little bit if he did refuse."

When our preparations were complete, we returned to the barn. In a few words Ajax told the stranger of what had been done.

"After supper," he concluded, "we'll talk things over. Times are rather good just now, and something can be arranged."

"You're very kind," replied the tramp; "but I think you had better leave me in the barn."

"We can't," said my brother. "It's too beastly to think of you like this."

Nevertheless, we had to argue the matter, and I ought to add that although we prevailed in the end, both Ajax and I were aware that the man's acceptance of what we offered imposed an obligation upon us rather than upon him. As he was about to enter the bath-house, he turned with the derisive smile on his lips—

"If it amuses you," he murmured, "I shall have earned my bath and supper."

When he reappeared, nobody would have recognised him. So far, the experiment had succeeded beyond expectation. A new man walked into our sitting-room and glanced with intelligent interest at our household gods. Over the mantelpiece hung an etching of the Grand Canal at Venice. He surveyed it critically, putting up a pair of thin hands, as so to shut off an excess of light.

"Jimmie Whistler taught that fellow a trick or two," he remarked.

"You knew Whistler?"

"Oh yes."

We left him with *Punch* and a copy of an art journal. Ajax said to me, as we went back to the barn—

"I'll bet he's an artist of sorts."

It happened that we had in our cellar some fine claret; a few magnums of Léoville, '74, a present from a millionaire friend. We never drank it except upon great occasions. Ajax suggested a bottle of this elixir, not entirely out of charity. Such tipple would warm a graven image into speech, and my brother is inordinately curious. Our guest had nothing to give to us except his confidence, and that he had withheld.

We decanted the claret very carefully. As soon as our guest tasted it, he sighed and said quietly—

"I never expected to taste that again. It's Léoville, isn't it? And in exquisite condition."

He sipped the wine in silence, while I thought of the bundle of foul rags upon our rubbish heap. Ajax was talking shop, describing with some humour our latest deal, and the present high price of fat steers. Our guest listened politely, and when Ajax paused, he said ironically—

"Yours is a gospel of hard work. I dare say you have ridden two horses to a standstill to-day? Just so. I can't ride, or plough, or dig."

Ajax opened his lips to reply, and closed them. Our guest smiled.

"You are wondering what brought me to California. As a matter of fact, a private car. No, thanks, no more claret."

Later, we hoped he might melt into confidence over tobacco and toddy. He smoked one cigar slowly, and with evident appreciation; and, as he smoked, he stroked the head of Conan, our Irish setter, an ultra-particular person, who abominated tramps and strangers.

"Conan likes you," said Ajax abruptly.

"Is that his name? 'Conan,' eh? Good Conan, good dog!" Presently, he threw away the stub of his cigar and crossed to a small mirror. With a self-possession rather surprising, he began to examine himself.

"I am renewing acquaintance," he explained gravely, "with a man I have not seen for some months."

"By what name shall we call that man?" said Ajax boldly.

There was a slight pause, and then our guest said quietly—

"Would 'Sponge' do? 'Soapy Sponge'!"

"No," said my brother.

"My father's Christian name was John. Call me 'Johnson.'"

Accordingly, we called him Johnson for the rest of the evening. While the toddies were being consumed, Johnson observed the safe, a purchase of my brother's, in which we kept our papers and accounts and any money we might have. We had bought it, second-hand, and the vendor assured us it was quite burglar-proof. Ajax mentioned this to our guest. He laughed presently.

"No safe is burglar-proof," he said; "and most certainly not that one." He continued in a slightly different tone: "I suppose you are not imprudent enough to keep money in it. I mean gold. On a big, lonely ranch like this all your money affairs should be transacted with cheques."

"We are in the wilds," said Ajax, "and it may surprise you to learn that not so very long ago the Spanish-Californians who owned most of the land kept thousands of pounds in gold slugs. In the attic over this old 'adobe,' Don Juan Soberanes, from whom we bought this ranch, kept his cash in gold dust and slugs in a clothes-basket. His nephew used to take a tile off the roof, drop a big lump of tallow attached to a cord into the basket, and scoop up what he could. The man who bought our steers yesterday has no dealings with banks. He paid us in Uncle Sam's notes."

"Did he?"

Shortly afterwards we went to bed. As our guest turned into the spare room, he said whimsically—

"Have I entertained you? You have entertained me."

Ajax held out his hand. Johnson hesitated a moment—I recalled his hesitation afterwards—and then extended his hand, a singularly slender, well-formed member.

"You have the hand of an artist," said the ever-curious Ajax.

"The most beautiful hand I ever saw," replied Johnson imperturbably, "belonged to a—thief. Good-night."

Ajax frowned, turning down the corners of his lips in exasperation.

'I am eaten up with curiosity," he growled.

. . . .

Next morning we routed out an old kit-bag, into which we packed a few necessaries. When we insisted upon Johnson accepting this, he shrugged his shoulders and turned the palms of his hands upwards, as if to show their emptiness.

"Why do you do this?" he asked, with a certain indescribable peremptoriness.

Ajax answered simply—

"A man must have clean linen. In the town you are going to, a boiled shirt is a credential. I should like to give you a letter to the cashier of the bank. He is a Britisher, and a good fellow. You are not strong enough for such work as we might offer you, but he will find you a billet."

"You positively overwhelm me," said Johnson. "You must be lineally descended from the Good Samaritan."

Ajax wrote the letter. A neighbour was driving in to town, as we knew, and I had arranged early that morning for our guest's transportation.

"And what am I to do in return for these favours ?" Johnson demanded.

"Let us hear from you," said my brother.

"You shall," he replied.

Within half an hour Johnson had vanished in a buckboard and a cloud of fine white dust.

Upon the following afternoon I made an alarming discovery. Our burglar-proof safe had been opened, and the roll of notes was missing. I sought Ajax and told him. He allowed one word only to escape his lips—

"Johnson !"

"What tenderfeet we are !" I groaned.

"Lineal descendants of the Good Samaritan. Well, he has had a long start, but we must catch him."

"If it should not be—Johnson ?"

"Conan would have nailed anybody else."

This was unanswerable, for Conan guarded our safe whenever there was anything in it worth guarding. Ajax never is so happy as when he can prove himself a prophet.

"I said he was an artist," he remarked. "The truth is, we tried an experiment upon the wrong man."

A few minutes later we took the road. We had not gone very far, however, before we met the neighbour who had driven Johnson to town. He pulled up and greeted us.

"Boys," said he. "I've a note for ye from that Britisher."

We took the note, but we did not open it till our Californian friend had disappeared. We had been butchered, but as yet the abominable fact that a compatriot had skinned us was something we wished to keep to ourselves.

"Great Minneapolis !" said Ajax. "Look at this !"

I saw a bank receipt for the exact sum which represented our bunch of steers.

" Is that all ? " I asked.

Ajax ought to have shouted for joy, but he answered with a groan.

" Yes ; there isn't a line of explanation. He said we should hear from him."

" And we have," I replied.

We returned to the ranch very soberly. When Ajax placed the bank receipt in the safe, he kicked that solid piece of furniture.

" We'll drive in comfortably to-morrow, and find out what we can," he observed.

" I don't think we shall find Johnson," I murmured.

Nor did we. The cashier testified to receiving the roll of notes, but not the letter of introduction. We hunted high and low for Johnson ; but he was not.

" How did he get away without money ? " he asked.

" He had money. I stuck a twenty-dollar bill into his coat pocket."

Before leaving town, we visited our gunmaker, with the intention of ordering some cartridges. By the merest chance, he spoke of Johnson.

" A Britisher was in here yesterday : somethin' o' the cut o' you boys."

" In a grey suit with a brown sombrero ? "

" Sure enough."

" Did he buy cartridges ? "

" He bought a six-shooter and a few cartridges."

" Oh ! " said Ajax.

We found ourselves walking towards a secluded lot at the back of the Old Mission Church. Ajax asked me for an opinion which I was too dazed to express.

" We've done a silly thing, and perhaps a wicked thing," said my brother. " If that poor devil is lying dead in the brush-hills, I shall never forgive myself. We've given a starving man too heavy a meal."

"Bosh!" said I, believing every word he uttered—the echo, indeed, of my own thoughts. "I feel in my bones we are going to see Johnson again."

Twenty-four hours later we heard of him. The Santa Barbara stage had been held up by one man. It happened, however, that a remarkably bold and fearless driver was on the box. The stage had been stopped upon the top of a hill, but not exactly on the crest of it. The driver testified that the would-be robber had leaped out of a clump of manzanita, just as the heavy, lumbering coach was beginning to roll down the steep hill in front of it. To pull up at such a moment was difficult, The driver saw his chance and took it. He lashed the leaders and charged straight at the highwayman, who jumped aside to avoid being run over, and then, being a-foot, abandoned his enterprise. He was wearing a mask fashioned out of a gunny-sack, new overalls, and *brown* shoes! That same night, at Los Olivos, a man wearing brown shoes was arrested by a deputy sheriff because he refused to give a proper account of himself; but, on being searched, a letter to the cashier of the San Lorenzo bank, signed (so ran the paragraph) by a well-known and responsible Englishman, was found in the pocket of his coat. Whereupon he was allowed to go his ways, with many apologies from the over-zealous official.

"Johnson!" said Ajax.

"Did he hold up the stage?" I asked.

"Of course he did," replied my brother contemptuously.

After this incident, Johnson, who for a brief time had loomed so large in our imaginations, faded into a sort of wraith. Years passed, bringing with them great changes for me. I left California and settled in England. I wrote a book which excited a certain amount of interest, and inspired some of my old school-fellows to renew acquaintance with me. By this time I had forgotten Johnson. He was part of a distant country, where the fine white dust settles thickly upon all things and persons. In England, where the expected, so to speak, comes to five o'clock tea, such surprising individuals as Johnson appear—if they ever do appear—as creatures of a disordered fancy or digestive apparatus. Once I told the story at the Scribblers' Club to a couple of journalists. They winked at each other, and said politely that I spun a good yarn, for an amateur! "I never tell a story," said the elder of my critics, "till I've worked out a climax. You leave us at the top of a confounded hill in California, bang up in the clouds."

And then the climax flitted into sight, masquerading as a barrel of claret. The claret came from Bordeaux. It was Léoville Poyferré, 1899. Not a line of explanation came with it, but all charges were prepaid. I wrote to the shippers. A Monsieur had bought the wine and ordered it to be consigned to me. Readers of this story will say that I ought to have thought of Johnson. I didn't. I thanked effusively half a dozen persons in turn, who had not sent the claret; then, hopelessly befogged, I had the wine bottled.

However, Johnson sent the wine, for he told me so. I had been passing a few days at Blois, and was staring at the Fragonard which hangs in the gallery of the château, when a languid voice said, "This is the best thing here."

"Hullo, Johnson!" I exclaimed.

"Hullo!" said he.

He had recognised me first, and addressed the remark about the picture to me. Nobody else was near us. We shook hands solemnly, eyeing each other, noting the changes. Johnson appeared to be prosperous, but slightly Gallicised.

"How is—Ajax?" he murmured.

"Ajax has grown fat. Can't you dine with me?"

"It's my turn. We must order a bottle of Léoville at once."

"You sent that wine," I exclaimed. There was no note of interrogation in my voice. I knew.

"Yes," he said indifferently; "it will be worth drinking in about ten years' time."

We had an admirable dinner upon a terrace overhanging the Loire, but the measure of my enjoyment was stinted by Johnson's exasperating reticence concerning himself. He talked delightfully of the châteaux in Touraine; he displayed an intimate knowledge of French history and archæology, but I was tingling with impatience to transport myself and him to California. And he knew this—the rogue!

Finally, as the soft silvery twilight encompassed us, he told what I wanted to know.

"My father was a manufacturer who married a Frenchwoman. My brothers have trodden carefully and securely in my father's footsteps. They are all fairly prosperous — smug, respectable fellows. I resemble my mother. After Eton and Christ Church I was pitchforked into the family business. For a time it absorbed my attention. I will tell you why later. Then, having mastered the really interesting part of it, I grew bored. I wanted to study art. After several scenes with my father, I was allowed to go my own way—a pleasant way, too, but it led downhill, you understand. I spent three winters in Venice. Then my father died, and I came into a small fortune, which I squandered. My mother helped me; then she died. My brothers cut me, condemning me as a Bohemian and a vagabond. I confess that I did take a malicious pleasure in rubbing their sleek fur the wrong way. Then I crossed the Atlantic as the guest of an American millionaire. He took me on in his own car to California. I started a studio in San Francisco—and a life class. That undid me, I found myself bankrupt. Then I fell desperately ill. Each day I felt the quicksands engulfing me."

"But your friends?" I interrupted.

"My friends? Yes, I had friends; but perhaps you will understand me, having seen to what depths I fell, that I couldn't bring myself to apply to my friends. Well, I was at my last gasp when I crawled up to your barn. I mean morally, for my strength was returning. You and your brother rode up. By God! I could have killed you!"

"Killed us?"

"You looked so fit, so prosperous, and I could read you both, could see in flaming capitals your pity, your contempt,—aye, and your disgust that a fellow-Englishman should be festering before your eyes. I asked for leave to spend the night in your barn, and you said, 'All right.' All right, when everything was so cruelly, so pitilessly the other way! Then you came back, taking for granted that I must accept whatever you offered. I wanted to refuse, but the words stuck in my throat. I followed you to the bath-house. Was I grateful? Not a bit. I decided that for your own amusement, and perhaps to staunch your English pride, which I had offended, you meant to lift a poor devil out of hell, so as to drop him again into deeper depths when the comedy was over——"

"Good heavens! You thought that?"

"My dear fellow, you write now, don't you? I'm giving you a bit of psychology—showing you the point of view of the worm writhing beneath the boot of lordly Man. But, always, I meant to turn, if I got the chance. I washed myself; I shaved; I slipped into your nice clean clothes. I'll admit that the warm water removed some encrusted mud from my mind, but it sharpened rather then obscured my resolution to make the most of what looked like a last chance. But when you uncorked that Léoville, shame spoiled it for me."

"You drank only two glasses, I remember."

"It brought everything back—everything! If I had had one more glass, I should have laid myself at your feet, whining and whimpering. The cigar that I smoked afterwards was poppy and mandragora. Through a cloud of smoke I saw all the pleasant years that were gone. Again I weakened. I had aroused your interest. I could have sponged upon you indefinitely. At that moment I saw the safe. Your brother imprudently mentioned that a large sum of money lay inside it. I made up my mind instantly to take the money, and did so that night. The dog was licking my hand as I robbed you. But next morning——"

He paused, then he laughed lightly.

"Next morning——"

"You appeared with the kit-bag! That disconcerted me terribly. It proved what I had not perceived—that you two young Englishmen, tenderfeet both of you, had realised what you were doing, had seriously faced the responsibility of resurrecting the dead. The letter to the cashier, the twenty-dollar bill I found in my coat-pocket—these were as scorpions. But I hadn't the nerve to own up. So I carried the money to the bank and deposited it to your account."

"Then you bought a six-shooter."

"Yes; I meant to try another world. I had had enough of this one. I couldn't go back to my wallow."

"What restrained you?"

"The difficulty of finding a hiding-place. If my body were discovered, I knew that it would be awful for you."

"Thanks."

"It's easy to find a hole, but it's not easy to pull a hole in after one—eh? Still, I thought I should find some wild gulch on the Santa Barbara trail, amongst those God-forsaken foothills. The buzzards would pull the hole in within forty-eight hours."

"Ah! the buzzards." I shivered, seeing once more those grim sextons of the Pacific seaboard.

"I found the right place; and just then I saw the stage crawling up the grade. Immediately the excitement of a new sensation gripped me. I had a taste of it when I opened your safe. It seized me again, relentlessly. If I were successful, I might begin again; if I failed, I could shoot myself without imposing an atrocious remorse upon you. Well, the pluck of that driver upset my plans—the plans of an amateur. I ought to have held them up on the upgrade."

"And after you failed——"

"Ah! after I failed I had a lucid interval. Don't laugh! I was hungry and thirsty. The most pressing need of my nature at that moment was a square meal. I walked to a hotel, and was nailed. Your brother's letter to the cashier saved me. I realised dimly that I had become respectable, that I looked—for the deputy sheriff told me so—an English gentleman—Mr. Johnson, your friend. That's about all."

"All?" I echoed, in dismay.

"The rest is so commonplace. I got a small job as clerk in a fruit-packing house. It led to better things. I suppose I am my father's son. I failed to make a living, spoiling canvas, but as a business man I have been a mild success."

"And what are you doing now?"

" I buy and sell claret. Any other question ? "

" Yes. How did you open our burglar-proof safe ? "

Johnson laughed.

" My father was a manufacturer of safes," he answered. " I know the tricks of my trade."

IX

UNCLE JAP'S LILY

JASPAR PANEL owned a section of rough, hilly land to the north-east of Paradise. Everybody called him Uncle Jap. He was very tall, very thin, with a face burnt a brick red by exposure to sun and wind, and, born in Massachusetts, he had marched as a youth with Sherman to the sea. After the war he married, crossed the plains in a "prairie schooner," and, eventually, took up six hundred and forty acres of Government land in San Lorenzo County. With incredible labour, inspired and sustained by his natural acuteness, he wrought a miracle upon a singularly arid and sterile soil. I have been told that he was the first of the foothill settlers to irrigate abundantly, the first to plant out an orchard and vineyard, the first, certainly, to create a garden out of a sage-brush desert. Teamsters hauling wheat from the Carisa plains used to stop to shake the white alkaline dust from their overalls under Uncle Jap's fig trees. They and the cowboys were always made welcome. To such guests Uncle Jap would offer figs, water-melons, peaches, a square meal at noon, and exact nothing in return except appreciation. If a man failed to praise Uncle Jap's fruit or his wife's sweet pickles, he was not pressed to "call again." The old fellow was inordinately proud of his colts, his Poland-China pigs, his "graded" bull, his fountain in the garden.

"Nice place you have, Mr. Panel," a stranger might say.

"Yas; we call it Sunny Bushes. Uster be nothin' but sun an' bushes onst. It's nice, yas, and it's paid for."

"What a good-looking mare!"

"Yas; she's paid for, too."

Everything on the ranch, animal, vegetable, and mineral, was "paid for." Uncle Jap was the last man to hurt anybody's feelings, but the "paid for" rankled on occasion, for some of his visitors stood perilously near the edge of bankruptcy, and, as a rule, had not paid for either the land they occupied, or the cattle they branded, or the clothes they wore. To understand this story you must grasp the fact that Uncle Jap lived with credit and not on it.

His wife, also of New England parentage, had a righteous horror of debt bred in her bone. Uncle Jap adored her. If he set an extravagant value upon his other possessions, what price above rubies did he place upon the meek, silent, angular woman, who had been his partner, companion, and friend for more than a quarter of a century. Sun and wind had burnt her face, also, to the exact tint of her husband's. Her name was Lily.

"And, doggone it, she looks like a lily," Uncle Jap would say, in moments of expansion. "Tall an' slim, yas, an' with a little droop of her head. I'd ought ter be grateful to God fer givin' me sech a flower outer heaven—an' I am, I am. Look at her now! What a mover!"

Uncle Jap's Lily chasing a hen certainly exhibited an activity surprising in one of her years. By a hairbreadth she missed perfection. Uncle Jap had been known to hint, nothing more, that he would have liked a dozen or so of babies. The hint took concrete form in: "I think a heap o' young things, colts, kittens, puppies—an' the like." Then he would sigh.

We came to California in the eighties, and in '93, if my memory serves me, Uncle Jap discovered bituminous rock in a corner of his ranch. He became very excited over this find, and used to carry samples of ore in his pocket which he showed to the neighbours.

"There's petroleum whar that ore is—*sure*. An' ef I could strike it, boys, why, why I'd jest hang my Lily with di'monds from her head to her feet, I would."

This, mind you, was before the discovery of the now famous oil fields. Even in those early days experts were of opinion that oil might be found below the croppings of bituminous rock by any pioneer enterprising enough to bore for it.

About this time we began to notice that Uncle Jap was losing interest in his ranch. Cattle strayed through the fence because he neglected to mend it, calves escaping were caught and branded by unscrupulous neighbours, a colt was found dead, cast in a deep gulch.

"What's the matter with Uncle Jap?" we asked, at the May-Day picnic.

Mrs. Fullalove, a friend of Mrs. Panel, answered the question.

"I'll tell ye," she said sharply. "Jaspar Panel has gotten a disease common enough in Californy. He's sufferin' from a dose o' swelled head."

Mrs. Panel sprang to her feet. Her face was scarlet; her pale eyes snapped; the nostrils of her thin nose were dilated.

"Susan Jane Fullalove," she cried shrilly, "how dare you?"

Mrs. Fullalove remained calm.

"It's so, Lily. Yer so thin, I didn't see ye sittin' edgeways, but ye needn't to ramp an' roar. Yer ranch *is* flyin' to flinders because Mr. Panel's tuk a notion that it's a-floatin' on a lake of ile."

"An' mebbe it is," replied Mrs. Panel, subsiding.

Shortly afterwards we heard that Uncle Jap was frequenting saloons, hanging about the hotels in the county town, hunting, of course, for a capitalist who would bore for oil on shares, seeking the "angel" with the dollars who would transport him and his Lily into the empyrean of millionaires. When he confided as much to us, my brother Ajax remarked—

"Hang it all, Uncle Jap, you've got all you want."

"That's so. I hev. But Lily—— Boys, I don't like ter give her away—this is between me an' you—she's the finest in the land, ain't she? Yas. An' work? Great Minneapolis! Why, work come mighty near robbin' her of her looks. It did, fer a fact. An' now, she'd ought ter take things easy, an' hev a good time."

"She does have a good time."

"Ajax, yer talkin' through yer hat. What do you know of wimmenfolk? Not a derned thing. They're great at pretendin'. I dessay you, bein' a bachelor, think that my Lily kind o' wallers in washin' my ole duds, an' cookin' the beans and bacon when the thermometer's up to a hundred in the shade, and doin' chores around the hog pens an' chicken yards? Wal—she don't. She pretends, fer my sake, but bein' a lady born an' bred, her mind's naterally set on—silks an' satins, gems, a pianner—an' statooary."

"I can't believe it," said my brother. "Mrs. Panel has always seemed to me the most sensible woman——"

"Lady, *if* you please."

"I beg pardon—the most sensible lady of my acquaintance, and the most contented with the little home you've made for her."

"She helped make it. O' course, it's nateral, you bein' so young an' innercent, that you should think you know more about Mis' Panel's inside than

I do, but take it from me that she's pined in secret for what I'm a-goin' ter give her before I turn up my toes."

With that he rode away on his old pinto horse, smiling softly and nodding his grizzled head.

Later, he travelled to San Francisco, where he interviewed presidents of banks and other magnates. All and sundry were civil to Uncle Jap, but they refused to look for a needle in a haystack. Uncle Jap confessed, later, that he was beginning to get "cold feet," as he expressed it, when he happened to meet an out-of-elbows individual who claimed positively that he could discover water, gold, or oil, with no tools or instruments other than a hazel twig. Uncle Jap, who forgot to ask why this silver-tongued vagabond had failed to discover gold for himself, returned in triumph to his ranch, bringing with him the wizard, pledged to consecrate his gifts to the "locating" of the lake of oil. In return for his services Uncle Jap agreed to pay him fifty dollars a week, board and lodging included. When he told us of the bargain he had made, his face shone with satisfaction and confidence. He chuckled, as he added slyly—

"I peeked in to some o' them high-toned joolery stores on Montgomery and Kearney Streets. Yas, I did. An' I priced what they call a ti—airy, sort o' di'mond crown. They run up into the thousands o' dollars. Think o' Mis' Panel in a *ti*—airy, boys; but shush-h-h-h! Not a word to her—eh?"

We pledged ourselves to secrecy, but when Uncle Jap's back was turned, Ajax cursed the wizard as the Cardinal Lord Archbishop of Rheims cursed the jackdaw. When we saw Mrs. Panel, she seemed to be thinner and more angular, but her lips were firmly compressed, as if she feared that something better left unsaid might leak from them. An old sunbonnet flapped about her red, wrinkled face, her hands, red and wrinkled also, trembled when we inquired after the wizard and his works.

"He's located the lake," she replied. Suppressed wrath boiled over, as she added fiercely: "I wish 'twas a lake o' fire an' brimstone, an' him a-bilin' in the middle of it." Then, reading the sympathy in our eyes, she continued quickly: "I ain't denyin' that Jaspar has a right to do what he pleases with what lies out o' doors. He never interfered with me in my kitchen, never! Would you gen'lemen fancy a glass o' lemonade? No? Wal—I'm glad you called in, fer I hev been feelin' kind o' lonesome lately."

What Uncle Jap's Lily suffered when he mortgaged all his cattle to sink a well nobody knows but herself, and she never told. The wizard indicated a certain spot below the croppings of bituminous rock; a big derrick was built; iron casing was hauled over the Coast Range; the well was bored.

Then, after boring some two thousand feet, operations had to be suspended, because Uncle Jap's dollars were exhausted, and his patience. The wizard swore stoutly that the lake was there, millions and millions of barrels of oil, but he deemed it expedient to leave the country in a hurry, because Uncle Jap intimated to him in the most convincing manner that there was not room in it for so colossal a fraud. The wizard might have argued the question, but the sight of Uncle Jap's old Navy six-shooter seemed to paralyse his tongue.

After this incident Uncle Jap ranched with feverish energy, and Mrs. Fullalove said that the old man had gotten over a real bad dose of swelled head.

. . . .

Five years later came the oil boom!

Everybody knows now that it flowed in prodigious quantities into the vats of one man, whom we shall speak of with the respect which the billionaire inspires, as the Autocrat of Petroleum. Let us hasten to add that we shall approach him in the person of his agent, who, so far as Uncle Jap was concerned, doubtless acted in defiance of the will of the greatest church builder and philanthropist in the world.

Oil was struck in pints, quarts, gallons, buckets, and finally in thousands and tens of thousands of barrels ! It flowed copiously in our cow-county ; it greased, so to speak, the wheels—and how ramshackle some of them were !—of a score of enterprises, it saturated all things and persons.

Now, conceive, if you can, the triumphant I-told-you-so-boys expression of Uncle Jap. He swelled again visibly : head first, then body and soul. The county kowtowed to him. Speculators tried to buy his ranch, entreated him to name a price.

" I'll take half a million dollars, in cold cash," said Uncle Jap.

The speculators offered him instead champagne and fat cigars. Uncle Jap refused both. He was not going to be " flimflammed," no, sir ! Not twice in his life, *no, Siree Bob* ! He, by the Jumping Frog of Calaveras, proposed to paddle his own canoe into and over the lake of oil. If the boys wished him to forgo the delights of that voyage, let 'em pungle up half a million—or get.

They got.

Presently, after due consultation with a famous mining engineer, Uncle Jap mortgaged his cattle for the second time, and sank another well. He discovered oil sand, not a lake. Then he mortgaged his land, every stick and stone on it, and sunk three more wells. It was a case of Bernard Palissy. Was Bernard a married man ? I forget. If so, did he consult his wife before he burnt the one and only bed? Did she protest? It is a fact that Uncle Jap's Lily did not protest. She looked on, the picture of misery, and her mouth was a thin line of silence across her wrinkled impassive countenance.

When every available cent had been raised and sunk, the oil spouted out. Who looked at the fountain in the patch of lawn by the old fig trees? Possibly Mrs. Panel. Not Uncle Jap. He, the most temperate of men, became furiously drunk on petroleum. He exuded it from every pore. Of course he was acclaimed by the county and the State (the Sunday editions published his portrait) as the star-spangled epitome of Yankee grit and get-there.

At this point we must present, with apologies, the agent of the Autocrat, *the* agent, the High-muck-a-muck of the Pacific Slope, with a salary of a hundred thousand a year and *perks*! In his youth Nat Levi smelt of fried fish, unless the smell was overpowered by onions, and he changed his lodgings more often than he changed his linen. Now you meet him as Nathaniel Leveson, Esquire, who travelled in his private car, who assumed the God, when the God was elsewhere, who owned a palace on Nob Hill, and some of the worst, and therefore the most paying, rookeries in Chinatown, who never refused to give a cheque for charitable purposes when it was demanded in a becomingly public manner, who, like the Autocrat, had endowed Christian Churches, and had successfully eliminated out of his life everything which smacked of the Ghetto, except his nose.

Nathaniel Leveson visited our county, opened an office, and began to lay his pulpy white hands upon everything which directly or indirectly might produce petroleum. In due season he invited Uncle Jap to dine with him at the Paloma Hotel, in San Lorenzo. The old man, with the hayseed in his hair, and the stains of bitumen upon his gnarled hands, ate and drank of the best, seeing a glorified vision of his Lily crowned with diamonds at last. The vision faded somewhat when Nathaniel began to talk dollars and cents. Even to Uncle Jap, unversed in such high matters as finance, it seemed plain that Leveson & Company were to have the dollars, and that to him, the star-spangled epitome of Yankee grit and get-there were to be apportioned the cents.

" Lemme see," he said, with the slow, puzzled intonation of the man who does not understand; " I own this yere oil——"

" Subject to the mortgage, Mr. Panel, I believe ? "

" That don't amount to shucks," said Uncle Jap.

" Quite so. Forgive me for interrupting you."

" I own this yere oil-field, lake I call it, and, bar the mortgage, it's bin paid for with the sweat of my—soul."

He brought out the word with such startling emphasis, that Nathaniel nearly upset the glass of fine old cognac which he was raising to his lips.

" Yas, my soul," continued Uncle Jap, meditatively. " I risked everything I'd got. Man," he leant across the gaily decorated table, with its crystal, its pink shades, its pretty flowers, and compelled his host to meet his flaming eyes,—" man, I risked my wife's love and respect. And," he drew a deep breath, " by God, I was justified. I got there. If I hadn't," the fire died down in his mild blue eyes, and the thin body seemed to wither and shrink,—" if I hadn't struck it, it would hev killed her, the finest lady in the land, an' me too. It was nip an' tuck with both of us. And now," his voice warmed into life again,—" and now you offer me fifty thousand dollars."

" I am anxious to treat you right, Mr. Panel. Another glass of brandy ? No. Between ourselves the market is getting weaker every day. Fifty thousand profit, perhaps, may seem a small sum to you, but I cannot offer more. You are at perfect liberty to refuse my cheque; others, perhaps——"

Uncle Jap rose up grim and gaunt.

"I've ate dinner with you," he murmured, "so I'll say nothing more than 'thank you' and 'good-bye.'"

"Good-bye, Mr. Panel. At any time, if you have reason to change your mind, I shall be glad to talk business with you."

Uncle Jap returned to his own hotel to pass a restless night. Next day he sought a certain rich man who had a huge ranch in our county. The rich man, let us call him Dives, had eaten Uncle Jap's figs, and taken his advice, more than once, about cattle.

"Who's a-buyin' oil lakes?" demanded Uncle Jap.

"Nathaniel Leveson."

"Who else?"

Dives eyed Uncle Jap keenly. Rich men don't tell all they know, otherwise they would not be rich. Still, those figs and that water-melon on a broiling July afternoon had tasted uncommonly good!

"Look here, Mr. Panel, I think I can guess what has happened. Somebody has tried to squeeze you—eh?"

"That's so."

"Um! You're not the first."

"I wan't squeezed."

"Not yet, but— Mr. Panel, I should like to do you a service, and I know you to be an intelligent man. Do you see this sheet of blotting-paper?"

The blotting-paper lay immaculate upon the desk. Dives took a clean quill, dipped it into ink, and held it poised over the white pad. Uncle Jap watched him with interest.

" This," continued Dives, thoughtfully, " represents you and your ranch, Mr. Panel," he made a small dot upon the blotting-paper. " This," he made a much larger dot, " represents me and all I have. Now Leveson represents—*this*."

With a violent motion, quite contrary to his usual gentle, courteous manner, Dives plunged the quill to the bottom of the ink pot, withdrew it quickly, and jerked its contents upon the blotting-paper. A huge purple blot spread and spread till the other small blots were incorporated.

" D——n him ! " spluttered Uncle Jap.

Dives shrugged his shoulders, and smiled

" My advice is : take what Leveson offers."

" Fifty thousand for millions ? "

" Possibly. Can you touch them, if Omnipotence forbids ? "

Dives stared moodily at the big purple blot ; then picking up the sheet of blotting-paper he tore it to pieces with his nervous, finely-formed fingers, and dropped it into the waste-paper basket. When he looked up, he saw that Uncle Jap's mild blue eyes were curiously congested.

" You might see So-and-so," Dives named a banker. " I'll write a note of introduction." Then he added with a faint inflection of derision : " I fear it will be of no service to you, because few business men care to buy trouble even at a bargain."

All this Ajax and I heard from Uncle Jap, after he returned from San Lorenzo without selling Sunny Bushes to So-and-so. None the less, he brought back a pair of small diamond ear-rings.

" Lily's ears ain't pierced," he explained ; " but she'll hev a reel splendid time lookin' at 'em, jest as I uster hev with my nightie."

" Your—*nightie ?* "

Uncle Jap chuckled and rubbed together his bony hands, cracking the joints.

"Yas, my nightie. Never tole you boys about that, did I? Wal, about a month before Lily an' me was fixin' up to get merried, she made me a nightie. It was mos' too dressy fer a lady to wear, let alone a critter like me who'd allus slep' in his pants an' day shirt. 'Twas of fine linen, pleated, and fixed with ribands, yaller riband, I chose the colour. Lily was kinder stuck on pale blue, but I liked yaller best. Lily knew what I' do with that nightie, an' I done it. I put it away in the tissoo paper 'twas wrapped in, an' I hev it still. I've got more solid satisfaction out of lookin' at it than I ever hev out o' my bank book. An," he concluded warmly, "Lily's goin' ter feel jest that-way about these yere sollytaires."

What followed immediately afterwards is county history. Uncle Jap decided to borrow money to develop his bonanza. The Autocrat, with tentacles stretching to the uttermost ends of the earth, may—I dare not affirm that he did—have issued instructions that such money as Jaspar Panel asked for was to be paid. Jaspar Panel asked for a good deal, and got it. He sunk more wells and capped them; he built reservoirs, he laid down pipe line. The day of triumph dawned when an English company offered to take all the oil Uncle Jap could supply, provided it were delivered free on board their vessels. Then came the crushing blow that the railroad would not transport Mr. Panel's petroleum. If they did—this was not the reason given by the shipping agents—the Autocrat might be *displeased.*

Meantime the banks politely requested Jaspar Panel to meet his obligations.

Hitherto, Uncle Jap had been a man of simple and primitive beliefs. He had held, for instance, that a beneficent Providence will uphold Right against Might; he had pinned his faith to the flag under which he fought and bled when a boy; he had told his Lily (who believed him) that American citizenship is a greater thing than a Roman's in Rome's palmiest day: a phrase taken whole from the mouth of a Fourth of July orator. Last of all, he had believed devoutly in his own strong hands and will, the partnership of mind and muscle which confronts seemingly insuperable obstacles confident that it can destroy them.

And now, hour by hour, day by day, conviction settled upon his soul that in this world one only reigned supreme: the Autocrat of Oil, whose High Priest was Nathaniel Leveson. After heart-rending months of humiliation, upon the eve of foreclosure by the banks, Uncle Jap wrote a forlorn letter to Nathaniel, accepting his offer of fifty thousand dollars for the lake of oil. Mr. Leveson, so a subordinate replied, *was not buying oil properties*! For the moment he was interested in other matters. . . . Uncle Jap happened to read next day that Leveson, treading in the footsteps of his Master, was about to present a splendid church to the people of San Lorenzo. Uncle Jap stared at the paper till it turned white, till he saw in the middle of it a huge purple blot ever-increasing in size.

That evening he cleaned his old six-shooter, which had made the climate of the county so particularly pestilential for the wizard with the hazel twig.

"Pore critter," he muttered as he wiped the barrel, "he was down to his uppers, but this feller——" Mrs. Panel, putting away the supper things, heard her husband swearing softly to himself. She hesitated a moment; then she came in, and seeing the pistol, a gasp escaped her.

"What air you doin' with that, Jaspar Panel?"

Uncle Jap coughed.

"There's bin a skunk around," he said. "I've kind o' smelled him for weeks past, hain't you ?"

"I never knowed you to shoot a skunk with anything but a shot-gun."

"That's so. I'd disremembered. Wonder if I kin shoot as straight as I used ter ?"

For answer his wife, usually so undemonstrative, bent down, took the pistol from his hand, put it back into the drawer, and, slightly blushing, kissed the old man's cheek.

"Why, Lily, what ails ye ?"

His surprise at this unwonted caress brought a faint smile to her thin lips.

"Nothing."

"Ye ain't tuk a notion that yer goin' to die ?"

"Nothing ails me, Jaspar," her voice was strong and steady. "I'm strong as I was twenty year ago, or nearly so. I kin begin life over agen, ef I hev to."

"Who said you hed to ?" enquired her husband fiercely. "Who said you hed to ?" he repeated. "Susan Jane Fullalove ? I'd like ter wring her dam neck. Oh, it wan't her, eh ? Wal, you take if from me that you ain't agoin' to begin life agen onless it's in a marble hall sech as you've dreamed about ever since you was shortcoated. Let me hear no more sech talk. D'ye hear ?"

"I hear," she answered meekly, and went back to her kitchen.

. . . .

Next day she came to us across the cow-pasture as we were smoking our pipes after the mid-day meal. We guessed that no light matter had brought her afoot, with such distress upon her face.

"I'm in trouble," she said nervously.

"We are your friends," said Ajax gravely.

"Jaspar's gone to town," she gasped.

Uncle Jap, since the striking of the oil, had been in the habit of going to town so often that this statement aroused no surprise. We waited for more information.

"I'm scared plum ter death," Mrs. Panel continued. "I want ter foller him at onst. Jaspar's taken the team. I thought maybe you'd hitch up and drive me in this afternoon—*now*."

The last word left her lips with a violence that was positively imperative.

"Certainly," said Ajax. He turned to leave the room. We neither of us asked a question. Upon the threshold he addressed me:

"I'll bring the buggy round while you change."

I reflected that it was considerate of Ajax to allow me to drive Mrs. Panel the twenty-six miles between our ranch and San Lorenzo. I nodded and went into my bedroom.

. . . .

For the first ten miles, Mrs. Panel never opened her lips. I glanced occasionally at her impassive face, wondering when she would speak. Somehow I knew that she would speak, and she did. It was like her to compress all she had left unsaid into the first sentence.

"Jaspar's gone plum crazy with trouble! he took his six-shooter with him."

After that, details given with a descriptive realism impossible to reproduce. The poor creature revealed herself to me during the next few minutes as I feel sure she had never revealed herself to her husband.

"He's mad, plum crazy," she pleaded. "Nobody knows what he's suffered but me. I don't say it ain't a jedgment, mebbe it is. We thought we was jest about right. The pride we took in Sunny Bushes was sinful; yas, it was. The Lord has seen fit to chastise us, an' I'm willin', I tole Jaspar so, ter begin agen. We're healthy, an strong, though we don't look it, I'll allow. Jaspar is plum crazy. His words las' night proved it. He said we might begin life agen in a marble hall sech as I hed dreamed about. Good land o' Peter! I never dreamed of marble halls in all my life, but I dassn't contradict him."

"He believes you dreamed of them," I said, "and he is quite sure you ought to live in them."

"He thinks the world o' me," said Mrs. Panel, in a softer tone, "but this world an' the next won't turn him from what he's set his mind to do. I'd oughter be ashamed o' speakin' so of him, but it's so. Mercy! I hev been talkin'."

She said no more till we descended from the buggy in the livery stable where Jaspar was in the habit of putting up his horses.

"You ain't seen Mr. Panel, hev you?" she asked the ostler.

"He's around somewheres," the man replied. With this information we started out to look for him. Away from the familiar brush hills, confronted by strange faces, confused, possibly, by the traffic, my companion seemed so nervous and helpless that I dared not leave her. Almost unconsciously, we directed our steps towards the Amalgamated Oil Company's office. Here we learned that Leveson was in town, and that Uncle Jap had called to see him.

"Did he see him?" Mrs. Panel's voice quavered.

"No," the clerk answered curtly; then he added: "Nobody sees the boss without an appointment. We told Mr. Panel to call to-morrow."

If the clerk had spoken with tongues of angels Lily could not have assumed a more seraphic expression.

"An' where is he now?" she asked.

"Your husband, ma'am? I can't tell you."

"I mean Mr. Leveson."

"He's in there," the private room was indicated, "and up to his eyes in work. He won't quit till he goes to dinner at the Paloma. D'ye hear the typewriters clicking? He makes things hum when he's here, and don't you forget it."

"I shall never forget that," said Mrs. Panel, in an accent which made me remember that her grandfather had been a graduate of Harvard University. "Good-afternoon."

We walked on down the street. Suddenly, Mrs. Panel staggered, and might have fallen had I not firmly grasped her arm.

"I dunno' what ails me," she muttered.

"Did you eat any breakfast this morning?"

"I dunno' as I did," she admitted with reluctance.

"Did you eat any dinner?"

"Mebbee I didn't.' Her innate truthfulness compelled her to add with a pathetic defiance: "I couldn't hev swallered a mossel to save my life."

I took her to a restaurant, and prescribed a plate of soup and a glass of wine. Then I said with emphasis:

"Now, look here, Mrs. Panel! I want you to rest, while I hunt up Mr. Panel. When I find him I'll bring him to you."

"An' s'pose he won't come?"

"He will come."

"No, he won't; not till he's done what he's set his mind to do. Was you aimin' to hunt fer Jaspar up an' down this town?"

"Certainly. It's not as big as you think."

"'Pears to me it'd be a better plan to keep an eye on the other feller."

With a woman's instinct she had hit the mark.

"Perhaps it would," I admitted.

"I noticed one or two things," she continued earnestly. "Near the office is an empty lot with trees and bushes. I'd as lief rest there as here ef it's the same to you. Then you kin look around for Jaspar, if ye've a mind to."

"And if I find him?"

"Watch him, as I shall watch the other feller."

"And then——"

"The rest is in the dear Lord's hands."

She adjusted the thick veil which Southern Californian women wear to keep the thick dust from their faces, and together we returned to Leveson's office. Passing the door, I could hear the typewriters still clicking. Mrs. Panel sat down under a tree in the empty lot, and for the first time since we had met that day spoke in her natural tones.

"I come away without feeding the chickens," she said.

I looked at my watch; it was nearly six. One hour of daylight remained. Leveson, I happened to know, was in the habit of dining about half-past six. He often returned to the office after dinner. Between the Hotel Paloma, which lay just outside the town and the office ran a regular service of street cars. Leveson was the last man in the world to walk when he could drive. It seemed reasonably certain that Jaspar, failing to see Leveson at the office, would try to speak to him at the hotel. From my knowledge of the man's temperament and character, I was certain that he would not shoot down his enemy without warning. So I walked up to the hotel feeling easier in my mind. The clerk, whom I knew well, assigned me a room. I saw several men in the hall, but not Uncle Jap.

"Does Mr. Leveson dine about half-past six?" I asked.

The clerk raised his brows.

"That's queer," he said. "You're the second man to ask that question withih an hour. Old man Panel asked the same thing."

"And what did you tell him?"

"Mr. Leveson don't dine till seven. He goes to the church first."

If the man had said that Leveson went to Heaven I could not have been more surprised. Then I remembered what I had read in the local papers. I had not seen the church yet. I had not wished to see it, knowing that every stone in it was paid for with the sweat—as Uncle Jap had put it—of other men's souls.

"Where is this church ?"

"You don't know? Third turning to the left after passing the Olive Branch Saloon."

"Leveson owns that too, doesn't he ?"

The clerk yawned. "I dare say. He owns most of the earth around here, and most of the people on it."

I walked quickly back towards the town, wondering what took Leveson to the church. No doubt he wanted to see if he were getting his money's worth, to note the day's work, perhaps to give the lie to the published statement that he built churches and never entered them. Nearly half-an-hour had passed since I left Mrs. Panel.

When I reached the third turning to the left I saw the church, certainly the handsomest in San Lorenzo. It stood in a large lot, littered with builders' materials. The workmen had left it at six. The building had an indescribably lifeless aspect. An hour before men had been busy within and without it, now not a soul was to be seen. I had time to walk round it, to note that the doors were locked, to note also, quite idly, that the window of the vestry was open. I could see no signs of Uncle Jap.

Coming round to the front, I saw in the distance a portly figure approaching, followed by a thin, dust-coloured wraith of a woman. I slipped behind a tree and waited. Leveson strolled up, bland and imposing. He stood still for a moment, staring intently at the outside of his church now completed. Then, taking a key from his pocket, he opened the vestry door and entered the building, closing the door behind him. I went to meet Mrs. Panel.

"Seen Jaspar?"

"I haven't."

"What's that feller," she always spoke of Leveson as a 'feller,' "doin' in a church?"

"It's his church. He built it."

"Good Land o' Peter! What's he doin' in it anyway?"

"Not praying, I think."

"Shush-h-h-h."

Mrs. Panel touched my arm, thrusting out her lean face in an attitude of intense attention. I strained my own ears, fairly good ones, but heard nothing.

"Jaspar's in there," said his wife. "I hear his voice."

She trembled with excitement. Obviously, Jaspar had concealed himself somewhere in the vestry. No time was to be lost.

Turning the north-east corner of the building, where the vestry is situated, I crawled under the window, followed by Mrs. Panel. The two men were within a few feet of us. Uncle Jap's slightly high-pitched tones fell sharply upon the silence.

"This is a leetle surprise party, ain't it?" he was saying.

Leveson answered thickly: "What are you doing here, sir?"

Although I risked discovery at an inopportune moment, I could not resist the temptation to raise my eyes level with the sill of the window. So did Uncle Jap's Lily. We both peered in. Uncle Jap was facing Leveson; in his hand he held the long-barrelled six-shooter; in his eyes were tiny pin-point flashes of light such as you see in an opal on a frosty morning. Terror had spread a grim mask upon the other; his complexion was the colour of oatmeal, his pendulous lips were quivering, his huge body seemed of a sudden to be deflated. He might have been an empty gas bag, not a man.

"I'm goin' to tell ye that," continued Uncle Jap mildly, "I come here to hev a leetle talk with you. Sinse I've bin in San Lorenzy County two men hev tried to ruin me: one left the county in a hurry; you're the other."

"I give you my word of honour, Mr. Panel——"

"That's about all *you* would give, an' it ain't wuth takin'."

"Do you mean to kill me?"

"Ef I hev to, 't won't keep me awake nights."

In my ear I heard his Lily's attenuated whisper: "Nor me neither, if Jaspar ain't caught."

And I had thought that solicitude for Jaspar's soul had sent his Lily, hot-foot to prevent the crime of—murder! I learnt something about women then which I shall not forget.

"You propose to blackmail me, I suppose?"

"Ugly word, that, but it's yours, not mine. I prefer to put it this way. I propose to consecrate this yere church with an act o' justice."

"Go on!"

"This county wan't big enough for the other feller an' me, so he had to go; it ain't big enough to-day for you an' me, but this time, I'm a-goin', whether you stay in it or *under* it."

At the word "under" Uncle Jap's Lily nudged me. I looked at her. Her face was radiant. Her delight in her husband at such a moment, her conviction that he was master of the situation, that he had regained by this audacious move all the prestige which he had in her estimation, lost—these things rejuvenated her.

"It's a question of dollars, of course?"

"That's it. Before you ask for credit with the angel Gabriel, you've got to squar' up with Jaspar Panel."

"With the dear Lord's help, Jaspar has found a way," whispered the joyful voice in my ear.

"How much?" demanded Leveson. His colour was coming back.

"We've got to figger on that. Take a pencil an' paper an' sit down."

"This is ridiculous."

"Sit down, you——"

Nathaniel Leveson sat down. The vestry had been used by the contractor as an office; the plain deal table was littered with scraps of paper. Leveson took out a gold pencil-case.

"Married man, ain't ye?" said Uncle Jap, with seeming irrelevance.

"Yes."

"Ever give your wife a ti—airy: diamond crown, sorter?"

"What the——"

"Answer—*quick!*"

"Yes."

"What did ye pay for it? *Quick!*"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Put that down first."

The joy and gladness had entirely melted out of Mrs. Panel's thin voice as she whispered dolefully to me: "Jaspar *is* crazy, after all."

"No, he isn't," I whispered back.

Jaspar continued in a mild voice: "What does a way-up outfit o' lady's clothes cost: sealskin sacques, satins, the best of everything outside and in?"

"I don't know."

"You've got to figger it out—*quick!*"

"Say ten thousand, more or less."

"Put down fifteen; I'd jest as lief it was more 'n less. Put down a hundred dollars fer me, I mean to hev a good suit o' clothes myself. What does that come to ? "

" Twenty-five thousand, one hundred dollars. Aren't you wasting time, Mr. Panel ? "

" Nit. Of course if we happened to be interrupted it might be awkward fer you. If somebody should call, you'll say, of course, that yer very particularly engaged, eh ? "

" Yes," said Nathaniel Leveson. " To oblige me, Mr. Panel, take your finger from that trigger."

" Ah ? I'd ought ter hev done that before. I'd disremembered 'twas a hair trigger. Now then, put down Sunny Bushes, includin' the oil lake, at yer own figger, fifty thousand. Got it ? Yas. Now then, for wear an' tear of two precious souls an' bodies—that's it ! Fifty thousand more. Got it ? Yas. How much now ? "

" One hundred and twenty-five thousand, one hundred dollars."

" Right ! What does a marble hall cost ? "

" A marble——"

" You heard what I said plain enough. You live in one yerself. What did that leetle shebang on Nob Hill cost ye ? "

" Four hundred thousand dollars."

" Jiminy Christmas ! Marble halls come high, but you've a large fam'ly, more's the pity. Put down seventy-five thousand. Got it ? Yas. Now then, about statooary—"

" Good God ! "

" Don't call on the Lord so loud. I reckon he's nearer than you give Him credit fer. Statooary comes high, too, but one don't want overly much of it. A leetle gives a tone to a parlour. Put down five thousand. Got it ! Yas. Furniture an' fixins, lemmee see ! Wal, when it comes to buyin' fixin's, Mis' Panel beats the world. Put down ten thousand more. Total, please ! "

"Two hundred and fifteen thousand and one hundred dollars."

"Make out yer personal note to me an' Mis' Panel fer that amount. One day after date. An' consideration. Sunny Bushes, oil, mortgage an' all, but *not* the stock, I wouldn't sell any living critter to sech as you. There's pen an' ink all handy."

We heard the scratching of pen on paper.

"Ye look mighty pleased," said Uncle Jap, "an' it's not because yer gittin' a property wuth a million for a quarter its value, nor because late in the day ye've squared an ugly account, but because yer thinkin' that this yere note ain't wuth the paper it's written on. An' it ain't—yit."

Again Mrs. Panel nudged me. Her beatific expression told me more eloquently than words that her Jasper was the greatest man on earth.

"Notes-of-hand given by onreliable parties must be secured," said Uncle Jap slowly. "This yere is goin' to be secured by a confession, dictated by me, written out an' signed by you. When the note is paid, I hand over the confession—see! If the note ain't paid prompt, the confession goes to the noospapers of this enlightened land. I shall git something from them for sech a remarkable doccyment. But, first of all, here an' now, you can make a small payment on the note. Give me that di'mond ring, an' the di'mond pin. *Quick!*"

A moment later these corruscating gems were swept into Uncle Jap's hand.

"What did they cost ye?"

"Twenty-seven hundred dollars."

"Suffering Moses! Endorse that as paid on the back of the note. Got it down? Yas." Uncle Jap folded up the note and placed it carefully in a large pocket-book. "Now write out, good an' plain, what I tell ye. Ready? Date an' address first. That's right. Now——"

Obviously, he was pulling himself together for a tremendous literary effort. Mrs. Panel had hold of my arm, and was squeezing it hard. Uncle Jap began—

" ' *This is to certify that I, Nathaniel Leveson, the undersigned, have been fooling with the wrong end of a mule, viz., Jasper Panel, who's as self-opinionated a critter as ever marched with Sherman to the Sea——* ' What air you doing ? "

Leveson had laid down his pen.

" This is farce," he said sharply.

" We'll hev your criticism after the play is over," retorted Uncle Jap decisively. " I'm talkin' now. Pick up that thar pen, and don't lay it down agen till I tell ye, or," the muzzle of the Colt almost touched the perspiring forehead of the Colossus, " or else, by Golly, thar'll be a terr'ble muss to clean up in here to-morrer mornin'. That's better. Lemmee see, whar was I ? ' *Sherman to the Sea,'* yas. Now : ' *I tried to down Jasper Panel, and he's downed me. I'm a nateral born hog, and I eat with all four feet in the trough.'* Underline that, it's good. ' *I'm big, an sassy, an' full o' meanness, but what sand I've got ain't to be seen with a double-barrelled microscope. I'm as false as Judas ; an' Ananias wouldn't be seen walkin' arm in arm with me in the place whar I'd oughter be to-night. I'd steal milk from a blind kitten an' sell it as cream to my own mother five minutes after.'* Underline that : it's straight goods. Now then fer the finish. ' *I wouldn't offer a fair price fer Sunny Bushes, because I aimed ter git it fer nothing. I wouldn't allow others to buy it fer the same reason. I used the power that the Devil give me to prevent a railroad, which I own, furnishin' cars to J. Panel, an' las'ly, I caused money ter be loaned to said J. Panel so's to git him com—pletely under my heel. Also I built a church in San Lorenzy, an' I write these yere lines in the vestry of it as a sorter penance. I* *swear solemn that this is the first time in my life that I ever tole the truth, an' I'll never do it agen, if I know myself.'*

" Sign that, an' give it ter me," said Uncle Jap.

Leveson, purple with rage and humiliation, signed it.

. . . .

At this psychological moment we made our presence known.

" Uncle Jap," said I, " don't you think that document ought to be witnessed."

" Jee—whillikins ! Ef it ain't you. Who's that a-peekin' behind ye ? "

" It's me, Jaspar," said Mrs. Panel meekly.

Uncle Jap unlocked the door of the vestry and let us in. Leveson sat huddled up in his chair. Uncle Jap prodded him with the ancient pistol which he still held in his hands.

" Can't you offer a lady a chair ? " he said testily. Leveson offered his chair, upon the extreme edge of which Mrs. Panel deprecatingly seated herself. Uncle Jap eyed her with wrinkled interrogation.

" What in thunder brought ye to San Lorenzy ? "

Mrs. Panel twisted her fingers.

" I looked in the drawer, an' I see that *that,*" she indicated the weapon, " was missin'."

" Did ye ? Now, Lily Panel, you don't mean to tell me that you thought I was goin' ter murder this feller ? "

Mrs. Panel looked at Leveson with an expression which I have seen in the eyes of foothill mothers, whose children run barefoot, when they have found a rattlesnake. Then she drawled out : " Wal, I hoped you might, but——"

" Why, Lily ! You hoped I might ? "

" Yes ; but I feared you'd git murdered first. Oh Jaspar, I didn't know you was sech a man."

She stood up, her eyes were shining, her face radiant " Fergive me, but I reckoned you—was—petered—out ? "

" Petered out—*me?* "

" Yas ; I'm a silly, fullish woman."

" No, you ain't. Petered out—*me* ? Wal," he glanced at Leveson, " somebody *is* petered out, but it ain't me. Did ye ever see a man scairt worse'n him ? I scairt the wizard some ; yas I did, but he could run : this feller can't crawl, I reckon. An' this yere Colt wan't loaded then, an' it ain't loaded—now. Look ! What an appetite I hev ! Who says supper ? Now, mister," he addressed Leveson, " seein' as the starch is outer you, I'll give ye my arm as fur as the Paloma."

" Leave me," gurgled Leveson.

" I'm too good a Christian. In the state yer in it 'd kill ye to meet somebody else ye've robbed. It's too risky."

" Go, you scoundrel ! Authority was returning to his voice ; the old arrogance gleamed in his eyes.

" Scoundrel—hay ? " Uncle Jap's voice became savage. " You come along with me—quick an' quiet. This old Colt ain't loaded, but ef I hit you over the head with the butt of it, ye'll think it is. Come ! "

In silence the four of us marched up to the Paloma, and into the big hall where a dozen men were smoking. Uncle Jap addressed the clerk in a loud, clear voice.

" Mr. Leveson," he said, " has just concluded a leetle deal with me. He's bought Sunny Bushes an' the lake of ile for two hundred and fifteen thousand and one hundred dollars. Here is his note. Put it in the safe for me till to-morrer."

The chatter in the big room had ceased long before Uncle Jap had finished. More than one man present divined that something quite out of the ordinary had taken place. Leveson moistened his lips with his tongue. His chance had come. Had he chosen to repudiate the note, had he denounced Uncle Jap as obtaining at the pistol point what could be obtained in no other way, the law of the land would have released him from his bond. But Uncle Jap had read him aright: he was a coward.

"Yes," he said. "I've bought Sunny Bushes."

"An' dirt cheap, too," said Uncle Jap. He spoke to the clerk in his usual mild voice: "Can you give Mis' Panel an' me accommodation?"

"Certainly, Mr. Panel. What sort of accommodation, sir?"

Uncle Jap looked fondly at his wife. I doubt if she had ever crossed the threshold of the Paloma before. I could see her blinking at the marble columns, at the velvet pile rugs, and the innumerable electric lights just turned on.

"What sorter accommodation?" repeated Uncle Jap. "Why, anything 'd do fer me, but Mis' Panel is mighty particular. We'll take the bridal suit, if it ain't engaged."

"Certainly; sitting-room, bedroom, and bathroom upon the first floor," said the clerk, striking a bell for the hall porter.

"Come, Lily," said Uncle Jap.

She raised her head, as if she were about to protest; then she smiled contentedly, and followed him out of the old life into the new.

X

WILKINS AND HIS DINAH

Wilkins had a pair of eyes that had seen better days. His features were still good, and the complexion showed quality of texture : a bloom often seen upon the faces of middle-aged men who in youth have been fair. His figure was imposing. When he lounged into a room, even a bar-room, he took the stage, so to speak ; you were bound to look at him. When he spoke you listened to words, wise or otherwise. When he smiled you were seized with an absurd desire to shake his hand !

He was herding sheep for Silas Upham, a man of flocks and herds, and the father of one child, Hetty. Meeting Wilkins for the first time, I wondered what Hetty thought of her sire's shepherd.

Wilkins told us that our back fence was down, and that a bunch of steers had broken through into Upham's alfalfa. We thanked him, offering whisky and tobacco. He accepted both with captivating smile and easy nod. A minute later he was sitting in our most comfortable chair, staring at our books and engravings. His eyes lingered upon the best of these with a look of recognition. He asked no questions.

Next day we rode over to his hut, and smoked some pipes. Wilkins spoke of India, Australia, France, and Italy, but he never mentioned England. Nor did we. Presently, somewhat to our surprise, Hetty Upham cantered into camp. The day happened to be unusually hot, which accounted, perhaps, for her rosy cheeks. She delivered a message to Wilkins, exchanged a few words with us, and galloped off.

" Goes faster than she came," said Ajax.

" Yes," said Wilkins. Then he added, with emphasis : "I don't blame any girl from galloping away from such a hole as this." With a derisive glance he indicated the flies swarming about his pots and pans, the ill-trimmed lamp reeking of petroleum, the rough bunk wherein he slept, the rusty stove. We contrasted these sordid surroundings with the splendours of Silas Upham's front parlour, and then we stared furtively at Wilkins.

About a week later Wilkins supped with us. Warmed by good food and drink, his reserve concerning himself somewhat melted. We learned that he had been but two weeks in Upham's service, that he had worked his passage down the coast from Vancouver to San Francisco.

" And how do you like the Uphams ? " said Ajax.

The use of the plural provoked a slight smile.

" Naturally, I don't see much of them," said Wilkins.

He picked up an old photograph album, and began to turn over its pages. Obviously, his thoughts were elsewhere ; and the sound of his own voice must have startled him.

" By Jove—it's old Sam ! "

He spoke in a whisper, as if to himself.

" Yes—it's old Sam," said Ajax quickly. " You were at Harrow ? "

Wilkins' eyelids fluttered ; then he met our glance with a shrug of his shoulders.

" Yes."

He stared at the portrait of Sam, the Custos of the School, the familiar of the Yard, of the Fourth

Room Form, Sam, the provider of birches, Sam of the port wine nose.

"*We* were at Harrow," said Ajax. "What house was yours?"

Wilkins hesitated; then he said slowly: "Tommy's."

"We were at Billy's."

Wilkins abruptly changed the subject, and soon after he left us. We rushed to the Harrow register. Yes, in Tommy's house, some seven years before our time, there had been a certain Theodore Vane Wilkins. Ajax, whose imagination runs riot, began to prattle about a Dinah, a Delilah of a Dinah, who had wrecked our schoolfellow's life. And, during the ensuing week, Dinah was continually in his mouth. Wilkins had moved camp, and we saw nothing of him. What we heard, however, must be set down. Silas Upham asked us to spend Sunday at his house. At dinner I sat next pretty little Hetty, and at once she spoke of Wilkins. To my annoyance, Ajax introduced the ridiculous Dinah, the perfidious creature of his fancy. Ajax was in his salad days, but he ought to have known, even then, that if you want to interest a maid in a man, tell her that the man has suffered at the hands of another maid. Hetty's blue eyes sparkled, her dimpled cheeks glowed with sympathy and indignation.

"Schoolfellow o' yours, was he? Well—I may make that feller foreman one o' these days," said Silas, with a fond, foolish glance at his daughter. Hetty could do what she pleased with her sire—and knew it.

"Poppa," said Miss Hetty, "you're all sorts of a darling, and I must kiss you."

Then she and Ajax strolled on to the verandah, and I found myself alone with my host. He said meaningly: "Wilkins has had a tough row to hoe—eh ? But he's a perfect gentleman, straight, sober, and a worker. I've been looking for a man that is a man to run things here, now that I'm getting a bit stiff in the joints. Hetty likes him first-rate too."

All this in an interrogatory tone. Of course, it was easy to fill the *lacunae* in the text. Silas Upham adored his daughter and his ranch. If Hetty married Wilkins, the artful Silas would gain an able-bodied, capable major-domo, and he would not lose his pet lamb. I said, rather tartly—

"Look here, Upham, you know nothing of Wilkins, and I advise you and—er—Miss Hetty to go slow."

"I do go slow," said my host, "but Hetty likes to buzz along. She's a mover, she is."

As we rode home I told Ajax that Opportunity had thrust into Wilkins' hand a very tempting morsel. Was he going to swallow it ? And ought we to ask some questions ?

I think it was on the following Wednesday that Wilkins walked over to the ranch-house, and asked for a job.

"I've left Upham," he said curtly.

We had not much to offer ; such as it was, Wilkins accepted it. Ajax drove to Upham's to fetch Wilkins' blankets and belongings. When he came back, he drew me aside.

"Silas offered him the billet of foreman. Wilkins *refused it*."

. . . .

A month passed. Wilkins worked hard at first, and his ability, his shrewdness, confounded us, as it had confounded Silas Upham. Then, he began to slack, as boys put it. Small duties were ill done or not done at all. But we liked him, were, indeed, charmed by him. As Ajax remarked, Fascination does not trot in the same class with Respect.

Twice I caught that shameless little witch, Hetty, in our back pasture, where Wilkins was splitting rails. Thrice a week she called at the ranch-house on her way to the post office.

" She means to marry Wilkins," said Ajax to me. " And why not ? If one woman has made him—er—invertebrate, let Hetty Upham put backbone into him."

That evening we asked Wilkins to witness a legal paper, some agreement or other. He signed his name Henry Wilkins. Ajax stared at me ; then he walked to the bookcase. His voice was very hard, as he turned, Harrow register in hand, and said : " The only Wilkins at Tommy's was Theodore Vane Wilkins."

Wilkins rose, shrugged his shoulders, and laughed. Ajax scowled.

" We told Silas Upham that you were an old Harrovian," began my brother.

" So I am ; but my name is not Wilkins." He lit a cigarette, before he continued quietly : "I'm a fraud. I'm not even an Englishman. My father was a Southerner. He settled in England after the war. He used to say bitterly that he had been born the wrong side of the Atlantic. He died soon after I left Harrow. With what money he left me I travelled all over the world : shooting, fishing, and playing the fool.

" When I found myself stony-broke, I hunted up my Baltimore relations. Some of them told me it was easier to marry money than to make it. My name—I'll keep that to myself, if you don't mind—had a certain value in the eyes of a rich girl I knew. At the same time there was another girl——"

" Ah—Dinah," Ajax murmured.

" We'll call her Dinah. Dinah," his voice shook for a moment, " Dinah cared for me, and I—I cared for her. But the girl with money had a blaring, knock-me-down sort of beauty that appeals to men. Lots of fellows were after her. Dinah had only me. Dinah was mine, if I chose to claim her; the other had to be won. The competition, plus the coin, ensnared me. I became engaged to the rich girl. I don't think I knew then what I was doing to—Dinah. Within a fortnight I was struck down with scarlet fever. The rich girl—she was game as a pebble—nursed me. I became delirious. My nurse listened to my ravings for two days and nights; then she went away. I came to my senses to find Dinah at my bedside. The other wrote later, releasing me from the engagement and bidding me marry the girl whose name had been on my lips a thousand times. I laughed, and showed the letter to Dinah. A friend promised me work. Dinah and I were going to live in a cottage, and be happy for ever and ever. . . .

"And then she—sickened!"

In the dreary silence that followed, neither Ajax nor I were able to speak.

"And—and she died."

. . . .

The poor fellow left us next day, and we never saw him again. It is to be remembered that he never encouraged Hetty Upham, whose infatuation was doubtless fanned by his indifference. She offered him bread, nay, cakes and ale, but he took instead a stone, because cakes and ale had lost their savour. We heard, afterwards, that he died on the Skagway Pass in an attempt to reach the Klondyke too early in the spring. He was seeking the gold of the Yukon placers; perhaps he found, beyond the Great White Silence, his Dinah.

XI

A POISONED SPRING

In our bunk-house three of the boys were about to turn into bed. They had worked hard all day, driving cattle into the home-pasture for the spring *rodeo,* and on the morrow they would have to work harder still, cutting out the steers and branding the calves.

"Who is this Perfessor?" asked Dan.

Jimmie, who was rubbing tallow on to his lariat, answered—

"There's a piece about him in the *Tribune.*"

Pete picked up the county paper, which happened to be lying on the floor. He read aloud, in a sing-song drawl—

"'We are greatly honoured by the presence amongst us of Professor Adam Chawner, the eminent surgeon and pathologist——'"

"How's that?" demanded Dan.

"Surgeon an' path—ologist."

"What's path—ologist?"

Pete expectorated a contempt for ignorance which he was too polite to put into words. Then he said suavely—

"A pathologist is a kind o' pathfinder. Comes from the Greek, I reckon: *path—logus*—skilled in finding noo paths to knowledge. See!"

"If you ain't a walkin' dictionary!"

"It comes nateral to me," Pete admitted modestly. He continued—

"'The Professor, instead of taking a well-earned holiday in our land of roses and sunshine, proposes to study at first hand the micrococci of a deadly disease which, we are given to understand, is peculiar to this part of California. . . .' "

" Never heard of a deadly disease peculiar to these parts," said Jimmie thoughtfully,—" always exceptin' Annie-dominie."

" ' Peculiar to this part of California,' " continued Pete, " ' and likely, given certain conditions, to develop into an epidemic as terrible and mysterious as the sleeping sickness.' "

" Sleepin' sickness ? What's that ? "

" Dan, yer ignorance is disgraceful. Sleepin' sickness is common as hives amongst the cannibals. After a square meal o' missionary, the critters fall asleep, and they don't never wake up neither. Serve 'em right, too."

" Go on, Pete."

Pete, with a thick thumb upon the right line, went on—

" ' The Professor's researches here may prove of vital importance. And, speaking for our fellow-citizens, we venture to assure this distinguished pathologist of our cordial desire to co-operate, so far as it may be possible, in the important work which he has undertaken.' "

" Slings words, that feller," remarked Jimmie. " But what in thunder is Perfessor Adam Chawner a-doin' in Paradise ? "

" Come, mebbee, to see you rope steers," suggested Dan.

" I shall aim not to disappoint him," replied Jimmie. " All the same, I ask you fellers straight : Has he come here to—work ? "

" Meanin' ? "

" If this yere deadly disease is on the rampage I, for one, 'd like to know it."

" Me too," drawled Dan.

A silence followed as Jimmie coiled up his rope.

Pete began to remove his boots. Dan, very furtively, placed a finger upon his pulse. Then he said with constraint—

"Boys, I don't want any joshin'. I've not felt extry spry lately."

"Same here," said Jimmie quickly.

Pete smiled sarcastically.

"A little bird tole me," he remarked slowly, looking at Dan, "as how Miss Mary Willing was seen a-buggy-ridin' las' Sunday with Jack Rice."

"It's true," said Dan, shortly. "Me and Mame is at outs. If I was dyin', I couldn't forgive her!"

"You don't say?" cried Jimmie. "Wal, Miss Edna Parkinson an' yours truly ain't goin' ter speak never no more, neither. That hound Ikey Greenberg has cut in with a noo Prince Albert coat. It's upset me considerable."

"My trouble ain't heart only," said Dan.

"Stomach?" suggested Pete.

"All overish, mostly."

"You ain't bin readin' the advertisements o' quack doctors, hev ye?"

"Not since I was twenty. They did give me fits at one time. Boys"—he began to scratch himself furiously—"I've a feelin' as if I was afire inside."

"Maw used ter give me sarsaparilla," said Jimmie.

"My folks," observed Pete, "never tuk nothin' but castor ile. Must ha' downed a barrel o' that when I was a kid."

"This thing is drivin' me crazy," said Dan.

"Wal," replied Pete deliberately, "I know what I'd do, and I'd do it quick. This yere Professor is on the ranch, and he's a dandy. After the *rodeo*, you jest sachay up to him an' tell him what you've tole us. If he don't take the kinks outer yer, he's a fraud. See!"

"Gosh," exclaimed Dan, "I'll do it!"

They turned in.

. . . .

The Professor next day watched the *rodeo* from a platform erected near the biggest of our corrals. This was his first visit to California, and he was mightily impressed by the skill and vigour of the vaqueroes. To Ajax he declared that he was amazed to find such splendid specimens in that particular locality. Ajax smiled.

"We have not much," he said, "but we feel that we have a right to expect high health. We used to say," he added, "that sickness was unknown in our hills till a wise doctor settled here from the East."

The Professor frowned.

"I rose at six," he said austerely. "I made a microscopical examination of the water in your new spring, which rises, I venture to remind you, through soil which is undoubtedly diatomaceous."

"That sounds awful."

"Diatoms in a fossilised condition are silicious, and they are to be found in Virginia, in Bermuda, and here."

"Professor, I am an ignoramus."

"Then it is my duty to inform you that the man or woman who drinks water from that spring is swallowing millions of tiny flint knives, hard as diamond dust—indeed, diatomaceous earth is used commercially as a polishing powder."

"You mean that if we drink that water we shall be polished off?"

The Professor glared. Like many distinguished scientists, he took himself seriously, and he knew that this was a serious matter.

"Those tiny flint knives cut to ribands the mucous membrane."

"Fortunately," said Ajax, "we don't drink that water. The spring was only developed a few days ago." In a graver voice he continued: "We are exceedingly obliged to you. Of course we shall warn our men."

"Has nobody drunk of that spring?"

Ajax thought that he detected a note of disappointment. He replied reflectively: "I don't think so. The cattle have used it. It doesn't seem to have affected them."

"Are you sure of that?" he demanded sharply.

"You can ask our foreman."

Later, the Professor did so. Uncle Jake came out of the corrals, carrying a branding-iron and found himself confronted by a short, thick-set man with prominent, slightly congested grey eyes, which shone keenly out of an immense head.

"I am Professor Chawner, of the Smithsonian. I wish to ask you a question."

"Perfessor, I'm happy to meet ye. It tickles me to death to answer questions. And I stand by the editor o' *The Tribune*. If I kin co-operate in yer important work, why, count me in."

The Professor raised his grizzled brows in astonishment, but he said politely—

"I am very much obliged to you. My question is this: 'Do the cattle drink at the spring which bubbles out of that hill yonder?'"

"Some of 'em do."

"Regularly?"

"Not to say reglerly, Perfessor. It's this way with cattle on a ranch as well watered as ours. They drink when they feel like it, and they drink where the water is handy to the feed. Come to think of it, there never has been much feed around that spring; and it never flowed good and hard till we opened it a few days ago."

"Since you opened it, to your personal knowledge, have cattle drunk of it?"

Uncle Jake scratched his head. The Professor's manner was impressive.

" Have you seen cattle actually drinking that water ? "

" I dunno' as I have. I've seen 'em standing in it."

" Animals have remarkable subjective intelligence—what you would term instincts. It would be extremely interesting to determine whether such instincts have prevented them from drinking water unfit for animal consumption."

" Unfit for animal consumption ? By gosh, that's what killed our cow, I reckon ! We found her lyin' by the spring, cold an' stiff, two days ago ! "

" Have you buried the carcass ? "

" Not much. Turkey-buzzards attend to our cow funerals."

" Of course. You look excited, my friend."

" I am. We've lost other cattle and colts in this yere pasture."

" Ah ! " murmured the Profesor. His expression became benignant.

" We s'posed," continued Uncle Jake, " that they died o' old age."

" You mentioned colts ? "

" I did so. Colts die anyhow and anyway. It's a solid fact that we've lost more animals in this pasture than anywheres else. I'll take my oath to that."

" Good ! " said the Professor heartily. " You have given to me information of value."

The Professor returned to the corrals. Under the trees, close to the creek, in whose cooling waters stood bottles of beer and wine, a tender calf was being barbecued. Upon long willow spits sizzled and frizzled toothsome morsels, made more toothsome by the addition of a sauce cunningly compounded of chillies, tomatoes, and the pungent onion. The Professor made a noble meal. He was delighted to observe how few of the guests slaked their thirst with water, and he quoted the famous quatrain :

"Let princes revel at the pump;
Let peers with ponds make free;
But whisky, beer, or even wine,
Is good enough for me."

After the *rodeo*, the Professor lighted a large cigar and composed himself under a live-oak. His mind, ever active, was wandering through the home-pasture seeking the fatal spring. He was trying to estimate the effect of silicious matter upon the mucous membrane of a cow, when he saw Dan, sombrero in hand, bowing low before him.

" Hello ! " said the Professor, his eye resting professionally upon Dan's splendid proportions. What a " subject " to cut up ! What a skeleton to articulate !

" Perfessor ! " said Dan, " I want you to hev a look at me."

The Professor looked at him.

" My young friend," he said genially, " you're worth looking at. Do you drink water ? "

" When I can't git nothing else," replied Dan. " Water it is, and lots of it, except when I strike town."

" If you must drink water," said the Professor with authority, " have it distilled."

" Jeeroosalem ! " exclaimed Dan. " That's a gilt-edged idea. Perfessor, ye're a pathologist, ain't yer ? "

The Professor nodded. Genius, however exalted, acknowledges unsolicited testimonials from any source. He saw plainly that in Dan's eyes he loomed gigantic.

" I am," he replied graciously.

" A path-finder, a seeker-out of noo tracks to knowledge ? "

" You might express it worse," said the Professor. ' What can I do for you ? "

"I'm a mighty sick man," said Dan solemnly.

The Professor was so astonished that he nearly bit through his excellent cigar; but at once a flame sparkled in his grey eyes. If Dan, with his appearance of robust health, was really a mighty sick man, why, then, his case challenged attention. He stood up and, so to speak, spread his wings, hovering over his lawful prey.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"I'm afire with itching. At this moment I feel as if some dev'lish imps was stickin' needles into me."

The Professor felt his pulse, looked at his tongue, and nodded sapiently.

"You've been drinking the water of that new spring."

"I hev. I helped open it up."

"Did you drink much of it?"

"Oceans!"

"My poor fellow, I am distressed beyond words. I promise you that you shall have every care and attention. I won't leave this ranch till—till the end."

"The end?"

"You are a remarkable specimen—probably you will make a gallant fight—but I cannot disguise from you—it would be criminal to do so—that you ought to put your house in order."

"Hav'n't got no house," said Dan, not quite comprehending, but sadly frightened. "Me and Mame expected to build next year, but that's off."

"Next year!" echoed the Professor testily. "The question is: Where will you be next week?"

Dan staggered. The Professor, having long retired from active practice, remembered with a qualm that he might have broken this appalling news more considerately. He said quietly—

"I beg your pardon. I ought to have tempered this ; but you are an American, and strong enough at this moment to know the truth. I may pull you through. Without boasting, there is not another man in America, or Europe either, who would say as much."

"Christopher Columbus ! "

"I don't call myself that," said the Professor modestly, "but I may claim to have discovered pathogenic continents. Now, my boy "—he took hold firmly of Dan's arm—"I am going to put you to bed."

"No, you ain't," said Dan. "I've chores to do. I can't be spared."

The Professor nodded.

"You're a stout fellow. After all, half-an-hour won't make any material difference."

"In half-an-hour you'll find me in the bunk-house. I'm obligated to ye," he added hastily. "So long ! "

He strode off. The Professor nodded approvingly. He had grit himself, and esteemed it highly in others.

"I must pull him through," he muttered.

. . . .

When the Professor reached the bunk-house, he found three tall strong men awaiting him. Their faces, tanned by many suns, exhibited a curious uniformity of tint—the colour of dirty gruel.

Dan said in a voice that trembled—

"These are my friends, Jimmie Barker and Pete Holloway. They helped open up that derned spring. They drank a plenty of the water. Jimmie, here, couldn't git enough of it. They've the same symptoms as I hev."

Jimmie and Pete writhed.

"Pins and needles all over," said Pete.

"Went to sleep on an ants' nest onst," said Jimmie faintly. "This is a heap worse."

"Heaven help you ! " ejaculated the Professor.

" 'Pears to me," said Dan solemnly, " from what you said just now, we're in the mulligatawny."

The Professor muttered something encouraging, but he remembered the cow.

" To bed with you," he commanded.

Within half-an-hour everyone on the ranch had heard the news. The Professor alone remained monumentally impassive.

" All that is humanly possible shall be done," he affirmed.

" And your treatment ? " said I.

" I have no drugs here, but already I have despatched a man to San Lorenzo for strychnia, which in the first stage is invaluable. Meantime I must do what I can with whisky. Have you plenty of whisky ? "

" Yes, but——"

" I want a gallon of it."

" Of course you are aware—you know, I mean——"

The Professor waved a powerful arm ; beneath his shaggy brows his grey eyes sparkled angrily.

" I know what I am doing," he said sharply, " and I cannot waste valuable time imparting to a layman knowledge gathered during a lifetime. The whisky, please—*at once*."

I obeyed meekly. Five minutes later, the Professor was walking towads the bunk-house with a gallon demijohn tucked under his arm. A quarter of an hour afterwards he might have been seen returning. His eyes were positively snapping with vigour and excitement, for he loved a fight for a fight's sake. Ajax met him.

" Professor," he said, " I don't want you to impart the knowledge of a lifetime to me, but do, please, tell us something. We are on edge with anxiety."

The man of science melted. With a shrug of his massive shoulders, he said, mildly for him—

"My dear sir, I will try to gratify a not unreasonable curiosity. I did not wish to alarm you prematurely this morning, but the worst has happened. The silicious fragments in that confounded earth have lacerated terribly the mucous membranes of these three unfortunate young men. That in itself is a matter of small importance. The mucous membrane is most delicate, but it has quite amazing capacities of repairing itself. The point is this. The water in that spring, and—I'll be perfectly frank—the water in most of the surface springs in this particular locality, is simply swarming with pathogenic germs, and amongst them I identified this morning the as yet unnamed *coccus* which I had the honour to discover, and which is as deadly as the *coma bacillus* of Asiatic cholera, or—shall I say?—the highly specialised venom of the rattlesnake."

"Great Scot!"

"This *coccus*, my dear friend, increases and multiplies under certain conditions. It exacts a highly lacerated condition of the mucous membrane into which it burrows. Fortunately it is rare; fortunately, also, it is seldom found in water which has filtered through diatomaceous earth; for these fossilised deposits are only found here and there, and, as a rule, not near water."

"They are three good fellows."

"I hope to pull them through," said the Professor stoutly. "For the moment there is nothing more to be done. They are in bed, and, not to put a fine point on it, half-drunk. Alcohol stupefies the *cocci*, but it does not destroy them. I shall pour whisky down their throats till the drugs I have ordered arrive from San Lorenzo. I have told your foreman that my patients are not to be disturbed. After supper I shall administer another dose of whisky."

An hour later, the Professor, accompanied by me, returned to the bunk-house.

"I hope to find them asleep," he said. "I gave them enough alcohol to induce stupor."

"How much?"

"At least a quart."

I said with deference—

"I do not presume to question your treatment, but cowboys can carry an amazing quantity of whisky. Alcohol is a stimulant-narcotic, isn't it?"

"Perfectly."

"It stimulates first. Speaking from a variegated experience of cowboys, I should say that a quart of well-matured Bourbon would barely suffice to stimulate three powerful young men."

"'Um!" said the Professor thoughtfully. "I had not considered that. They assured me they were water-drinkers. However, a mistake of that sort is easily rectified."

So speaking, he tiptoed to the door of the bunk-house, and, finger upon lips, entered. Immediately a sharp exclamation indicated that something surprising had occurred. I followed quickly, to find the Professor staring, pop-eyed, at three vacant bunks.

"Gone!" said the Professor, in stupefaction.

"They can't have gone far, sir."

But within five minutes judgment upon this important point had to be suspended. Uncle Jake had obeyed instructions only too well. He had not been near the bunk-house. Indeed, he and the other ranch hands had been eating supper more than a hundred yards away. He was the first to suggest that no cowboy travelled far afoot—a suggestion that sent the Professor at a smart trot towards the big barn. Here, also, were three vacant stalls.

The Professor's patients, illustrating pathetically the ruling passion, had mounted and galloped away. Uncle Jake said, with a curious air of conviction—

" It's my idee that they want to hev one good time in town before they cash in their checks."

" Incredible ! " ejaculated the famous pathologist. He looked askance at me. I replied hesitatingly—

" I think it is possible, perhaps probable."

" If they're makin' San Lorenzy," said Uncle Jake, " we'll find their store clothes gone too."

We hastened to the bunk-house. Yes, upon the floor lay flannel shirts and jumpers and overalls. In a corner, where the Professor had left it, stood the demijohn of whisky. Uncle Jake lifted it.

" Gosh," said he, " the whisky's gone, too ! "

" Thank Heaven ! " muttered the Professor, wiping his forehead.

" Why ? "

" Don't you understand ? By the luck of things, they've taken their medicine ! "

" A quart apiece ! " I gasped. " We shall find them dead drunk on the road."

Uncle Jake delivered himself—

" It's my idee that they've jest filled up three bottles. There's a rubbish heap outside."

" We must follow them," said the Professor, grimly. He was no horseman, and San Lorenzo was six-and-twenty miles away.

" Yes," said Uncle Jake.

As they approached the barn, the Professor whispered to me—

" There is nothing to regret. If I can get these boys into the County Hospital before to-morrow morning, I shall have done a splendid night's work. Pick me out a decently mannered horse."

. . . .

After the Professor had administered the first dose of alcohol, his patients lay quiet for at least three minutes. Then Jimmie said dolefully—

" Badly as she's treated me, I'd like to kiss my Edna good-bye."

In the silence that followed Pete's rather rasping voice was heard—

"I ain't got no best girl!"

"Ye're in luck," groaned Dan. "This may break pore Mame's heart. When I'm gone, she'll remember that onst I was the greatest thing on this green earth to her."

Presently Pete remarked: "Surgeon an' pathologist is the Perfessor."

"Meanin'?"

"Like as not he'll operate."

"Operate?"

"Cut us open, you derned fool!"

Dan retorted savagely: "Now ye're so near yer end, I'd go easy with sech talk, if I was you."

"I beg yer pardon," said Pete, "but I'm scairt of the Perfessor's eye. Anyways, sink or swim, I'll hev no man gittin' his knife into me."

Dan sat up.

"Boys," he said emphatically, "you kin do as you please, but I'm goin' to hev a las' kind word with my Mame."

He slipped out of his bunk.

"Me too," said Jimmie. He glanced at Pete, who lay still. "My regards to the Perfessor, and tell him that he'll find us at old man Greiffenhagen's. I'll hev one more taste of happiness before I die."

Dan hauled out his battered trunk and opened it. Pete sat up.

"Talkin' o' tasting, so will I," said he. "Give me that ther demijohn. I'll die like the Dook o' Clarence."

Jimmie picked up the demijohn and looked at it with lingering eyes.

"Sorry I promised Maw to let whisky alone."

"If it comes to that," said Pete, "what's the matter with callin' it medicine?"

"Gee! So it is." He took out the cork and tipped up the demijohn, balancing it skilfully upon his right forearm.

" Pass it over," said Pete.

" After you," added Dan.

" Go easy," said Pete shortly. " You two fellers mean to expire in the arms o' ministerin' angels. Leave the demijohn with me."

" What! You'd hog all the medicine? Why, Pete Holloway, I thought you was white! "

" Put that demijohn down."

Dan glanced at Jimmie, who was drawing on his best pants.

" Say, Jimmie, we'll hev to take the medicine along. There's a plenty for Pete in the cellar."

Pete slipped out of his bunk.

" Look ye here," he said. " I ain't goin' to face the Perfessor alone. I'll come with ye, but let there be no huggin' before me; and, I say, divide the medicine."

" Now yer talkin'," said Dan, approvingly.

The three men dressed rapidly, opened the door, and peered out. Nobody being in sight, they secured three empty bottles, which they filled with the medicine. Five minutes later they were leading their saddle-horses out of the barn. Unobserved, they mounted and took the road.

" How air you two feelin'? " said Pete, as they broke into an easy " lope."

" Thunder and Mars! " exclaimed Dan. " It's a doggoned fact, but I'm feeling fine."

" It's the medicine," said Jimmie, athirst for more.

" The Perfessor's a stem-winder, an' no mistake," said Pete. " Let's drink his health—onst."

They did so—twice.

Old man Greiffenhagen's was about two miles distant. With him lodged Miss Edna Parkinson and Miss Mary Willing. These young ladies were bosom friends, and members of the Women's

Christian Temperance Union. We describe them adequately enough by adding that they were capable, pretty and good.

By this time it was nearly nine o'clock, but a light shone in the Greiffenhagen parlour. As the young men dismounted and hitched their horses to the fence, the strains from an American organ were heard.

Pete rapped upon the door, which was opened by Greiffenhagen. He kept the village store, which was also the post-office, and, although German himself, had married an American wife. Pete said in a loud voice—

"It's kind o' late, but this is a P.P.C. call."

As he spoke, there was wafted to the nostrils of Greiffenhagen the familiar fragrance of Bourbon. He glanced at Dan and Jimmie. Each appeared almost abnormally sober and solemn. At this moment Miss Mary Willing flitted up.

"Why, it's Mr. Holloway!" she exclaimed stiffly.

The three entered. As they passed the threshold, Jimmie stumbled, but recovered himself. He saluted the ladies with decorum, and the three sat down upon the edge of the chairs that were offered to them. Then Miss Edna Parkinson, who was the only person present besides Pete who understood what was meant by a P.P.C. call, and who knew also that, the big *rodeo* being over, it was possible that the three cowboys had been discharged, said sympathetically—

"You ain't leaving these parts, are you?"

Pete answered grimly: "It's more'n likely that we air."

Edna glanced at Mamie, who was sniffing.

"What is it I smell?" she asked.

"Medicine," said Dan. He knew that Pete, the walking dictionary, could be trusted to break the appalling news to these unhappy girls. He glanced at Mr. Holloway and nodded.

"Yes," said Pete, "you smell medicine. It was prescribed by the distinguished surgeon an' pathologist, Perfessor Adam Chawner."

"Prescribed? Why?"

Once, in the dear dead days that were gone, Pete had owned a best girl, who had treated him ill. Ever since he had exhibited a not too chivalrous desire to "git even" with the fond but fickle sex. Also he had no respect for the W.C.T.U.

"The trouble come o' drinkin' too much water."

"Too much water?"

"We three hev bin wallerin' at a pizoned spring. The Perfessor may pull us through, but it's no cert. Much the contrairy. Likely as not you'll be attendin' our funerals within' the week. Dan and Jimmie tuk a notion that they'd like to forgive ye, an' I come along too because I reckon misery loves company. But I made this stippilation—no huggin' before me, if you please."

"Is he—d-d-drunk?" faltered Edna.

"I'm nearly drunk," said Pete. "This yere pizon is same as rattlesnake pizon. We've got to be kep' filled plum up with whisky." He produced his bottle and placed it carefully upon the floor, then he added: "When I can't help myself, I count on you, old man"—he looked at Greiffenhagen—"to pour it down my throat."

"Dan," said Miss Willing, "can't you say something?"

"I'm razzle-dazzled," said Dan. "But I couldn't die without forgivin' yer."

"Edna," said Jimmie, with a sob in his voice, "I have no hard feelin's left."

"These three *beasts*," said Mrs. Greiffenhagen, in a hard, unwavering voice, "are disgracefully and unblushingly intoxicated. Girls, leave the room!"

The girls looked at each other. Mamie Willing leapt to the situation. Upon a small marble-topped table reposed an immense family Bible. Mamie lifted it and approached Pete.

" Swear on this that your terrible story is true."

" I swear," said Pete solemnly, and he kissed the Book. Edna flung herself into Jimmie's arms; Mamie, after replacing the Bible, knelt sobbing at Dan's side. Pete said helplessly to old man Greiffenhagen : " Take me outer this ! "

Mrs. Greiffenhagen said in the same hard monotone : " Mr. Greiffenhagen, either these men leave this house or I do."

The storekeeper led his wife aside and whispered to her. She nodded none too graciously, and he hurried from the room.

" Wheer's he goin' ? " asked Pete.

" He's goin' up ter the ranch-house," said Mrs. Greiffenhagen spitefully, " ter fetch the Professor."

" Very right an' proper," yawned Pete. " Would it be trespassin' too much on yer kindness to ask for three glasses ? It's time we downed some more medicine, an' I don't like to drink outer the bottle in this yere parlour."

Mrs. Greiffenhagen folded her hands. She had been heard to declare in public that if she were dying, and a thimbleful of whisky would restore her to health and Mr. Greiffenhagen, she would not swallow it.

The three men took more medicine. Presently Mamie supported Dan to the sofa ; Edna was sitting on the floor with Jimmie's head on her lap. Mrs. Greiffenhagen glared at Pete, who from time to time kissed his hand to her. Not till she heard footsteps on the porch outside did the good lady rise from her chair. She opened the door to admit her husband. He reeled in.

"You too!" she said in a freezing voice.

Greiffenhagen explained. The boys were really poisoned, and whisky must be poured down their throats till stronger remedies arrived. The Professor, Ajax, and Uncle Jake were riding to San Lorenzo upon a wild-goose chase. He added that the boss was driving down with more whisky.

Within a few minutes I arrived with the whisky; and Mrs. Greiffenhagen was constrained to unbend. It was decided to put the men to bed, pending the arrival of the Professor. Two vaqueros were galloping after him in the hope of overtaking him before he had gone too far. Dan was undressed and placed in Miss Willing's muslin-curtained bed; Jimmie who would not permit his clothes to be removed, was laid upon the couch of Edna Parkinson. Pete was carried into the Greiffenhagen bedroom, and deposited, boots and all, upon a spotless white bedspread.

"Jiminy Christmas," said Greiffenhagen, "ain't it awful!"

At regular intervals the medicine was administered. Finally, what the Professor had desired came to pass. The three men lay senseless, breathing stertorously. To achieve this result more than a gallon of the best whisky had been used! Mamie and Edna began to exhibit symptoms of hysteria.

"I'll never leave my Dan—never!" declared Mamie, when it was suggested that she should return to the parlour.

"Jimmie, dear," sobbed Edna, "if you'll promise me not to die, I'll never speak to Mr. Greenberg again!"

. . . .

At about six the next morning Pete Holloway woke up. He opened his eyes, groaned deeply, and closed them again.

"How are you feeling, Pete?" said I.

Pete groaned again, for memory of all that had passed came to him. With a tremendous effort he said—

"I'm dyin'!"

And he looked it.

In Miss Parkinson's bower, Jimmie Barker was saying faintly: "Kiss me good-bye, Edna; the hour has come!"

Shortly before, Mamie had whispered to Dan: "Darling, can you forgive me?" And he had replied fervently: "Mame, if Jack Rice kin make you happy, you take him."

Greiffenhagen had tried to administer more medicine. The boys refused to touch it. Pete expressed the feelings of the others when he muttered: "I ain't goin' to cross the Jordan drunk!"

It seemed to me that the three men were sinking. Mrs. Greiffenhagen, an impassioned pessimist, was of opinion that they couldn't last another hour!

At nine, when our nerves had been strained to breaking-point, Ajax and a big-bearded stranger galloped up to Greiffenhagen's house.

"It's Doc. Elkins, of San Lorenzy," said a hired man.

"The boys are sinking!" sobbed Mrs. Greiffenhagen. "Where is the Professor?"

"I left him in San Lorenzo."

Elkins and Ajax rushed upstairs and into the Greiffenhagen bedroom. Elkins glanced at Pete, felt his pulse, and then said deliberately—

"My man, you're dying of sheer funk! You've poisoned yourself with nothing more deadly than good Kentucky whisky! In six hours you'll be perfectly well again."

Pete heard, and pulled himself together. It struck him that this was not the first time that he had felt nearly dead after imbibing much whisky.

" But the Perfessor ? " he asked feebly.

" Professor Adam Chawner," said Elkins in a clear voice, " is in a strait-waistcoat at the County Hospital. He will get over this, but not so quickly as you will. He is quite mad for the moment about a deadly microbe which only exists in his imagination."

The partitions in most Californian houses are indecently thin. As Elkins's voice died away—and Pete said afterwards it was like a strain of heavenly music—a feeble cheer was heard from the chamber usually occupied by Miss Mary Willing.

" Jimmie," cried Dan, " air you dead yet ? "

" Not quite," came an attenuated whisper from the other side of the passage.

" We'll live to be married, old socks," continued Dan in a robuster voice, " but I've got the worst dose o' prickly heat you ever saw."

The following day our three friends were riding the range. Six months afterwards, Professor Adam Chawner resumed his work at the Smithsonian Institute.

XII

THE BABE

One of the Britishers who came to Paradise was an Irishman, the son of an archdeacon with a large family and a small income. He was a strapping fellow, strong and sturdy as a camel—and quite as obstinate. He always spoke affectionately of his people, but I fancy they were not deeply grieved when he left England. I dare say he was troublesome at home; you know what that means. However, he was warmly welcomed in Paradise, for he brought with him two hundred pounds in cash, and a disposition to spend it as quickly as possible. Ajax christened him The Babe, because he had a milk-and-roses complexion, and a babe's capacity for, and love of, liquid refreshment. Perhaps the archdeacon thought that the West was a sort of kindergarten, where children like The Babe are given, at small expense, object-lessons and exercises peculiarly adapted to young and plastic minds. In Central America certain tribes living by the seaboard throw their children into the surf, wherein they sink or learn to swim, as the Fates decree. Some sink.

When The Babe's two hundred pounds were spent, he came to us and asked for a job. He said, I remember, that he was the son of an archdeacon, and that he could trust us to bear that in mind. We were so impressed by his guileless face and cock-a-hoop assurance, that we had not the heart to turn him away.

At the end of a fortnight Ajax took pencil and paper, and computed what The Babe had cost us. He had staked a valuable horse; he had smashed a patent reaper; he had set fire to the ranch, and burnt up five hundred acres of bunch grass; and he had turned some of our quiet domestic cows into wild beasts, because—as he put it—he wished to become a vaquero. He said that the billet of foreman would just suit his father's son.

"The equivalent of what The Babe has destroyed," said my brother Ajax, "if put out at compound interest, five per cent., would in a hundred years amount to more than fifty thousand pounds."

"I'm awfully sorry," murmured The Babe.

"I fear," observed Ajax to me later, "that we cannot afford to nurse this infant."

I was of the same opinion; so The Babe departed, and for a season we saw his chubby face no more. Then one day, like a bolt from the blue, came an unstamped letter from San Francisco. The Babe wrote to ask for money. Such letters, as a rule, may be left unanswered, but not always. Ajax and I read The Babe's ill-written lines, and filled in the gaps in the text. Connoted and collated, it became a manuscript of extraordinary interest and significance. We inferred that if the sum demanded were not sent, the writer might be constrained to cast himself as rubbish to the void. Now The Babe had his little failings, but cowardice was not one of them. Indeed, his physical courage redeemed in a sense his moral and intellectual weakness.

"There is only one thing to do," said Ajax; "we must rescue The Babe. We'll spin a dollar to determine who goes to the city to-morrow morning."

I nodded, for I was smelling the letter; the taint of opium was on it.

"Awful—isn't it?" murmured Ajax. "Do you remember those loathsome dens in Chinatown?

And the creatures on the mats, and in the bunks! And that missionary chap, who said how hard it was to reclaim them. Poor Babe!"

Then we filled our pipes and smoked them slowly. We had plenty to think about, for rescuing an opium-fiend is no easy job, and reclaiming him afterwards is as hard again. But The Babe's blue eyes and his pink skin—what did they look like now?—were pleading on his behalf, and we remembered that he had played in his school eleven, and could run a quarter-mile in fifty-eight seconds, and was always cheery and good-tempered. The woods of the Colonies and the West are full of such Babes; and they all like to play with edged tools.

Next day we both went north. Ajax said that two heads were better than one, and that it was not wise to trust oneself alone in the stews of San Francisco. The police will not tell you how many white men are annually lost in those festering alleys that lie north of Kearney Street, but if you are interested in such matters, I can refer you to a certain grim-faced guide, who has spent nearly twenty years in Chinatown, and you can implicitly believe one quarter of what he says: that quarter will strain your credulity not a little.

We walked to the address given in the letter—a low dive—not a stone's-throw from one of the biggest hotels west of the Rocky Mountains. The man behind the bar said that he knew The Babe well, that he was a perfect gentleman, and a personal friend of his. The fellow's glassy eyes and his grey-green skin told their own story. A more villainous or crafty-looking scoundrel it has been my good fortune not to see.

"Where is your friend?" said Ajax.

The man behind the bar protested ignorance. Then my brother laid a five-dollar gold piece upon the country, and repeated the question. The man's yellow fingers began to tremble. Gold to him was opium, and opium held all his world and the glory thereof.

"I can't take you to him—now," he muttered sullenly.

"You can," replied Ajax, "and you must."

The man glared at us. Doubtless he guessed the nature of our errand, and wished to protect his friend from the interference of Philistines. Then he smiled evilly, and laughed.

"All right; come on. I ain't goin' to take yer to the Palace Hotel."

He opened the till and slipped some money into his pocket. Then he put on a ragged overcoat, and a hat which he drew down over his eyes with a furtive jerk of his yellow fingers. Then he went behind the bar and swallowed something; it was not whisky, but it brought a faint tinge of colour into his cheek, and seemed to stiffen his knees.

"Shall we walk, boys, or shall I send for my carriage?"

"Your carriage," repeated Ajax. "Are you speaking of the patrol-waggon? It is just round the corner."

This allusion to the police was not wasted upon The Babe's friend, who scowled and retorted glibly—

"There's better men than you, mister, who ride in that."

After this exchange of pleasantries we took the road, and followed our guide across a great thoroughfare and into Kearney Street. Thence into the labyrinth of Chinatown.

"Think ye could find yer way out of this?" asked our guide presently.

We had passed through an abominable rookery, and were walking down a narrow alley, seemingly deserted. Yet I was sensible that eyes were furtively watching us from behind barred windows, and I fancied that I heard whispers—mere guttural sounds, that conveyed nothing to the ear, save, perhaps, a warning that we were on unholy ground. The path we trod was foul with refuse ; the stench was sickening ; the most forlorn cur would surely have slunk from such a kennel ; and here, *here*, to this lazar-house of all that was unclean and infamous, came of his own free-will—The Babe !

" My God ! " exclaimed Ajax, in reply. " How can any man find his way *into* it ? And, hark ye, my friend, for reasons that we won't trouble you with, we have not asked the police to accompany us, but if we are not back at our hotel in two hours' time, the clerk has instructions to send a constable to your saloon."

" Here we air," said our guide. " Duck yer heads."

We stooped beneath a low arch, and entered a dark passage. At the end was a rickety staircase ; and already we could smell the pungent fumes of the opium, and taste its bitterness. As I groped my way down the stairs I was conscious of an uncanny silence, a silence eloquent of a sleep that is as death, a sleep that always ends in death. It was easy to conceive death as a hideous personality lurking at the bottom of those rotten stairs, waiting patiently for his victims ; not constrained to go abroad for them, knowing that they were creeping to him, creeping and crawling, unassoiled by priest, hindered by no physician, unredeemed by love, deaf, and blind, and dumb !

. . . .

At the foot of the stairs was another passage, darker and filthier than the one above ; the walls were streaming with moisture, and the atmosphere almost unendurable. At that time the traffic in opium was receiving the serious attention of the authorities. Certain scandalous cases of bribery at the Custom House had stirred the public mind, and the police were instructed to raid all opium dens, and arrest whomsoever might be found in them. The devotees of the "pipe" were accordingly compelled to lie snug in places without the pale of police supervision: and this awful den was one of them.

It was now so dark that I could barely distinguish the outlines of our guide, who walked ahead of me. Suddenly he stopped and asked me if I had any matches. I handed him my box, which he dropped, and the matches were scattered about in the mud at our feet. He gave me back my box, and asked Ajax for his matches. I dare say older and wiser men would have apprehended mischief, but we were still in our salad days. Ajax gave up his box without a protest; the man struck a match, after some fumbling lit a piece of candle, and returned to my brother his box. It was empty—for he had cleverly transferred the matches to his own pocket—but we did not know that then. By the light of the candle I was able to take stock of my surroundings. We were facing a stout door: a door that without doubt had been constructed for purposes of defence, and upon the centre of this our guide tapped softly—three times. It opened at once, revealing the big body of a Celestial, evidently the Cerberus of the establishment. Upon his fat impassive face lay the seal of an unctuous secrecy, nothing more. Out of his obliquely-set eyes he regarded us indifferently, but he nodded to our guide, who returned the salutation with a sly laugh. For some inexplicable reason that laugh fired my suspicions. It was—so to speak—an open sesame to a chamber of horrors, the more horrible because intangible and indescribable. Ajax said afterwards that he was similarly affected. The contagion of fear is a very remarkable thing, and one little understood by the physiologists. I remember I put my hand into my pocket, because it began to tremble, and I was ashamed of it. And then, as I still stared at the fat Chinaman, his smooth mask seemed to drop from his face, and treachery, cunning, greed, hatred of the " white devil " were revealed to me.

I was now convinced we had come on a fool's errand that was like to end evilly for us, but, being a fool, I held my peace and said nothing to Ajax, who confessed later that if I had spoken he would have seconded a motion to retreat. We advanced, sensible that we were being trapped: a psychological fact not without interest.

Opposite the door through which we had just passed was another door as stout as the first. The Chinaman unlocked this with a small key, and allowed us to enter, the guide with the candle leading the way. And then, in a jiffy, before we had time to glance round us, the candle was extinguished; the door was closed; we heard the click of a patent lock; and we knew that we were alone and in darkness.

The first thing that Ajax said, and his voice was not pleasant to hear, was: " This serves us right. Of all the confounded fools who meddle with what does not concern them, we are the greatest."

Then I heard him fumbling for his matchbox, and then, when he dicovered that it was empty, he made some more remarks not flattering to himself or me. I was more frightened than angry; with him rage and disgust were paramount.

We stood there in that squalid darkness for about a hundred years (it was really ten minutes), and then the voice of our guide seemed to float to us, as if from an immeasurable distance.

" Boys," he said. " How air ye makin' it ? "

Ajax answered him quite coolly—

" What do you want ? Our money of course. What else ? "

The fellow did not reply at once. These opium fiends have no bowels of compassion. He was doubtless chuckling to himself at his own guile. When he did speak, the malice behind his words lent them point.

"Your money? The five you gave me'll keep me a week, and after that I'll come for more."

With that the voice died away, and Ajax muttered: "It looks to me as if this were a case of putting up the shutters."

We had forgotten all about The Babe, which is not surprising under the circumstances.

"Putting *up* the shutters? Pulling them down, you mean! there must be a window of sorts in this room."

But after careful search we came to the conclusion that we were directly under the road-bed, and that the only opening of any kind was the door through which we had passed. I thought of that door and the face of the man behind it. For what purpose save robbery and murder was such a room designed? I could not confront the certainty of violence with a jest, as Ajax did, but I was of his opinion otherwise expressed: we had been trapped like rats in a blind drain, and would be knocked on the head—presently.

The uncertainty began to gnaw at our vitals. We did not speak, for darkness is the twin of silence, but our thoughts ran riot. I remember that I almost screamed when Ajax laid his hand on my shoulder, and yet I knew that he was standing by my side.

"I shall try the heathen Chinee," he whispered. So we felt our way to the door and tapped three times, very softly, on the centre panel. To the Oriental mind those taps spell bribery, but the door remained shut.

"What have you been thinking about?" said Ajax, after another silence.

" My God—don't ask me."

" Brace up ! " said my brother. I confess that he has steadier nerves than mine, but then, you see, he has not my imagination. I put my hand into his, and the grip he gave me was reassuring. I reflected that men built upon the lines of Ajax are not easily knocked on the head.

" It's a tight place," he continued. " But we've been in tight places before, although none that smells as close as this infernal hole. Now listen : I'm prepared to lay odds that The Babe is not an opium fiend at all, and has never been near this den. He wrote that letter at the saloon, didn't he ? And ten to one he borrowed the paper from the bar-tender. That's why it smelled of opium. The handwriting was very shaky. Why ? because The Babe was only half alive after a prolonged spree. That accounted for the tone of the letter. The Babe was thinking of the parsonage, and his mother's knee, and all that. You follow me—eh ? Now then, I think it barely possible that instead of our rescuing The Babe, he will rescue us. We got in late last night, but our names were chronicled in the morning papers, for I saw them there. If The Babe sees a paper he will go to our hotel, and——"

" If we're hanging by that thread to eternity, God help us," I replied bitterly, for the grim humour of my brother's speech chilled my marrow.

" It *is* a slim chance, but—hang it—a slim chance is better than none."

So we hugged that sorry comfort to our hearts and fell again into silence.

. . . .

I remember that the folly, the fatuity of what we had done, oppressed me like an iron band around the skull. Common sense told me that the man who had decoyed us into Chinatown would not be satisfied with robbery. And what were the lives of two " white devils " to the owner of this den? Suffered to escape, we might inform the police. The logical conclusion of my reflections is not worth recording.

" When that scoundrel emptied the till into his pocket he made up his mind there and then never to come back," said Ajax in my ear. His thoughts had been travelling along the same lines as mine, and at about the same pace. I was convinced of this when he added slowly: " Starvation may be their game. It would be the safest to play."

Then the mad, riotous desire to fight got hold of both of us. We began to search for a weapon: anything—a stick, a stone, a bit of iron. But we found nothing.

We had never carried pistols, and our pocket knives were hardly keen or strong enough to sharpen a pencil.

Despair was again gripping me when Ajax touched my arm. We had examined the filthy floor of the room very systematically, kneeling side by side in the darkness and groping with eager fingers in the dirty sand, for there was no floor.

" I have something," he murmured. Then he seized my right hand in his left and guided it to some solid object lying deep in the sand.

The object proved to be a log. San Francisco is built on sand dunes, and in early days the houses were log-cabins for the most part, constructed of logs that two stout men could handle. After many minutes of silent but most vigorous excavation we joyfully decided that one of these very logs had come into our possession.

We worked steadily for about half an hour, pausing now and again to listen. We were practically certain that the opium fiend had gone to his pipe, and it was more than probable that the fat Mongol was no longer on guard, knowing that we were safe in a strong-box to which he alone held the key. Events proved we were wrong in both conjectures.

When the log was ready for use as a battering-ram we held a council of war, which lasted about half a minute. If there is obviously only one thing to be done, the sooner it is done the better. I grasped the forward end of our weapon, Ajax, being the heavier, took the other, and we charged that door with such hearty goodwill that at the first assault it yielded, lock and hinges being torn from the woodwork, and the door itself falling flat with a crash like the crack o' doom. Ajax, the log, and I rolled into the next room, and as we were grovelling on the floor I saw that the room was full of Chinamen, and that our late guide was in the middle of them. The light was so bad that I was unable to see more than this. It was plain that we had to deal with an organised gang of criminals. Thugs who practised their trade as a fine art. Despite all proverbs the foreseen is what generally happens ; and our amazing advent in their midst created a sort of panic whereby we took advantage. The Celestials carried knives, but they dared not use them, because the light was so dim and the room so crowded. The first thing that I saw when I scrambled to my feet was the fat dull face of the guard shining like a harvest moon, and presenting a mark for my fist as round and big as a punching-bag. I hit him once—and that was enough. Then I began to hear the measured thud of my brother's blows, the blows of a workman who knows how to strike and where to strike.

At first they took their medicine without a whimper. Then they began to squeal and chatter as the fear of the " white devils " got hold of them. Very soon I saw " red," as our Tommies say, and remembered nothing till I came to myself in the passage at the foot of the rotten stairs. We scurried up these and through the warren above like rabbits when the pole-cat pursueth, and finally found ourselves in the alley, where we called a halt.

"By Jove!" said Ajax, "that was a ruction."

I looked at him and burst out laughing: then he looked at me and laughed louder than I. Our clothes were in rags; our faces were red and black with blood and grime; every bone and sinew and muscle in our bodies ached and ached from the strain of strife.

"It is not time to laugh yet," said my brother; and we ran on down the alley, out into a small by-street, and straight into the arms of a policeman, who promptly arrested us.

. . . .

The rest of the story was in the newspapers next day, although there was no mention of our names. When the police reached the battlefield they found one dead man—the opium-eating and smoking bar-tender. He had died—so said the doctor—of heart failure. Few whites can smoke the "pipe" with impunity, and he was not of their number. The wounded had been carried away, and, despite the strenuous endeavours of the police, not one was arrested, which proves that there is honour amongst these yellow-faced thieves, for a handful of gold-pieces and "no questions asked" was well known in Chinatown to be the price offered for any information that would lead to the capture of one or more of the gang.

When we reached our hotel we found The Babe patiently awaiting us. His complexion was slightly the worse for wear, but his eyes were as blue as ever and almost as guileless. How wide they opened when he listened to our story! How indignant he waxed when he learned that we had condemned him, the son of an archdeacon, as an opium fiend. However, he was very penitent, and returned with us to the ranch, where he dug post-holes for a couple of months, and behaved like a model babe. Ajax wrote to the archdeacon, and in due season The Babe returned to England, where he wisely enlisted as a trooper in a smart cavalry regiment, a corps that his grandfather had commanded. The pipeclay was in his marrow, and he became in time rough-riding sergeant of the regiment. I am told that soon he will be offered a commission.

This story contains two morals: both so obvious that they need not be recorded.

XIII

THE BARON

Of the many queer characters who took up land in the brush hills near our ranch none excited greater tongue-wagging than the Baron. The squatters called him the Baron. He signed his name—I had to witness his signature—Réné Bourgueil.

The Baron built himself a bungalow on a small hill overlooking a pretty lake which dried up in summer and smelled evilly. Also, he spent money in planting out a vineyard and orchard, and in making a garden. What he did not know about ranching in Southern California would have filled an encyclopædia, but what he did know about nearly everything else filled us and our neighbours with an ever-increasing amazement and curiosity.

Why did such a man bury himself in the brush hills of San Lorenzo County?

More, he was past middle-age: sixty-five at least, not a sportsman, nor a naturalist, but obviously a *gentilhomme*, with the manners of one accustomed to the best society.

Of society, however, he spoke mordant words—

"Soziety in Europe, to-day," he said to me, shortly after his arrival, "ees a big monkey-house, and all ze monkeys are pulling each ozer's tails. I pull no tails, *moi*, and I allow no liberties to be taken wiz my person."

About a month later the Baron was dining with us, and I reminded him of what he had said. He laughed, shrugging his shoulders.

" *Mon cher*, ze monkeys in your backwoods are more—*diable!*—moch more aggr-r-ressive zan ze monkeys in ze old world."

" They pull tails there," said Ajax, " but here they pull legs as well—eh ? "

The Baron smiled ruefully, sticking out a slender, delicately formed foot and ankle.

" Yes," he said thoughtfully, " old man Dumble, he pull my leg."

The Dumbles were neighbours of the Baron, and their sterile acres marched with his. John Jacob Dumble's word might be as good or better than his bond, but neither was taken at par. It was said of him that he preferred to take cash for telling a lie rather than credit for telling the truth. Dumble, as we knew, had sold the Baron one horse and saddle, one Frisian-Holstein cow, and an incubator. The saddle gave the horse a sore back, the horse fell down and broke its knees, the cow dried up in a fortnight, and the incubator cooked eggs to perfection, but it wouldn't incubate them. " I use it as a stove," said the Baron.

Next summer, when the pretty lake dried up and began to smell, we advised the Baron to take a holiday. We told him of pleasant, hospitable people in San Francisco, in Menlo, and at Del Monte, who would be charmed to make his acquaintance.

" San Francisco ? *Jamais, jamais de la vie !* "

" Come with us to Del Monte ? "

" Del Monte ? "

We explained that Del Monte was a huge hotel standing in lovely gardens which ran down to the sea.

" *Jamais—jamais,*" repeated the Baron.

" We don't like to leave you at the mercy of John Jacob Dumble," said Ajax.

" You have right. I make not harmony wiz ze old man Dumble."

We went home sorely puzzled. Obviously the Baron had private reasons, and strong ones, for keeping out of San Francisco and Del Monte. And it was significant—as Ajax said to me—that a man who could talk so admirably upon art, politics, and literature never spoke a word concerning himself.

At Del Monte we happened to meet the French Consul. From him we learned that there was a certain Réné, Comte de Bourgueil-Crotanoy. The Château Bourgueil-Crotanoy in Morbihan is nearly as famous as Chaumont or Chénonceau. The Consul possessed an *Almanach de Gotha*. From this we gleaned two more facts. Réné, Comte de Bourgueil, had two sons, and no kinsmen whatever.

"Your man," said the Consul discreetly, "must be somebody—you say he is *somebody*—well, somebody else!"

"Another Wilkins," said I.

"Pooh!" ejaculated Ajax.

"No Frenchman of the Comte de Bourgueil's position and rank—he is a godson, you know, of the Comte de Chambord—would come to California without my knowledge," said the Consul.

The day after our return to the ranch we rode over to see how the Baron fared. We found him in a tent pitched as far as possible from the evil-smelling lake. Passing the bungalow, we had noted that six weeks' uninterrupted sunshine had played havoc with the Baron's garden. The man himself, moreover, seemed to have wilted. The sun had sucked the colour from his eyes and cheeks. Of a sudden, old age had overtaken him.

He greeted us with his usual courtesy, and asked if we had enjoyed our holiday. We told him many things about Del Monte, but we didn't mention the French Consul. Then, in our turn, we begged for such news as he might have. He replied solemnly—

"I speak no more wiz ze Dumbles. Old man

Dumble ees a fraud. *Moi*, I abominate frauds—*hein?* He obtain my money onder false pretences, is it not so? Ah, yes; but I forgive 'im, because he is poor. But also, since you go, he obtain my secret—I haf a secret—under false pretences. Oh, ze *canaille*! I tell 'im that if 'e were my equal I would wiz my sword s-spit 'im. Because 'e is *canaille* I s-s-spit at 'im. *Voilà!*"

The old fellow was trembling with rage and indignation. Ajax said gravely—

"We foreigners mustn't spit at free-born American citizens. What spitting is done here, they do themselves."

"You have right. Ze *canaille* say to me, to *me*, 'Come,' he say, 'come, Baron, I have one six-shooter, one shot-gun, two pitchfork, three spade, and one mowing-machine. Take your choice,' he say, 'and we can fight till ze cows come home!' He use zose words, *mes amis*, 'till ze cows come home!' *Tiens!* Ze Frisian-Holstein cows, who go dry when zey *do* come home—*hein?*"

He was so furiously angry that we dared not laugh, but we were consumed with curiosity to know what secret Dumble had stolen. The Baron did not inform us.

Fortunately for our peace of mind, Dumble came to us early next morning. He went to the marrow of the matter at once.

"Boys," said he, "I want you to fix up things between me an' that crazy Frenchman. How's that? Your friend. Wal, he *is* a Frenchy, an' he's crazy, as I'm prepared to prove. But I don't want no trouble with him. He's my neighbour, and there ought to be nothin' between me an' him."

"There'll always be a barbed wire fence," said Ajax.

"Boys, when that ther' pond o' the Baron's tuk to smellin' like dead cats, he come to me and asks me to find someone to take keer o' the bungalow.

I undertook the job myself. I was to water them foreign plants o' his, do odd chores, and sleep in the house nights. He offered good pay, and I got a few dollars on account. I aimed to treat the Baron right, as I treat all my neighbours. I meant to do more, more than was agreed on. That's the right sperit—ain't it? Yas. An' so, when I found out that there was a room in that ther' bungalow locked up, by mistake as I presoomed, and that the key o' the little parlour opened it, why, naterally, boys, I jest peaked in to see if everything was O.K. As for pryin' and spyin', why sech an idee never entered my head. Wal, I peaked in an' I saw——"

"Hold on," said Ajax. "What you saw is something which the Baron wished to be kept secret."

"I reckon so, though why in thunder——'

"Then keep it secret——"

"But, mercy sakes! I saw nothing, not a thing, boys, save two picters and a few old sticks of furniture. An' seeing that things was O.K., I shet the door, but doggone it! the cussed key wouldn't lock it. Nex' morning the Baron found it open, and, Jeeroosalem! I never seen a man git so mad."

"And that's all?"

"That's all, but me an' the Baron ain't speakin'."

We promised to do what we could, more, it must be confessed, on the Baron's account than for the sake of old man Dumble. Accordingly, we tried to persuade the Baron that his secret at any rate was still inviolate. He listened incredulously.

"He says he saw nothing—but some pictures and old furniture."

"*Mon Dieu!* an' zey tell 'im nossing. *Saperlipopette!* Come wiz me. I can trust you. You shall know my secret, too."

We followed him in silence up the path which led to the bungalow, and into the house. The Baron unlocked a door and unbolted some shutters. We saw two portraits, splendid portraits of two handsome young men in uniform. Above the mantelpiece hung an emblazoned pedigree: the family tree of the Bourgueil-Crotanoy, peers of France. The Baron laid a lean finger upon one of the names.

" I am Réné de Bourgueil-Crotanoy," he said.

We waited. When he spoke again his voice had changed. It was the voice of a very old man, tired out, indifferent, poignantly feeble.

" My boys," said he, indicating the two young men, " zey are dead ; no one of ze old Bourgueil-Crotanoy is left except me—and I, as you see, am half dead. Perhaps I was too proud ; my confessor tell me so, always. I was—I am still—proud of my race, of my château. I was not permitted to serve Republican France, but I gave her my boys. They went to Tonquin ; I remained at home, thinking of ze day when zey would return, and marry, and give me handsome grandchildren. Zey did—not—return. Zey died. One in battle, one of fever in ze hospital. What was left for me, *mes amis* ? Could I live on in ze place where I had seen my children and my children's children ? No. Could I meet in Paris ze pitying eyes of friends ? "

. . . .

Years afterwards, Ajax and I found ourselves in Morbihan. We paid a pilgrimage to the Château de Bourgueil-Crotanoy, and entered the chapel where the last of the Bourgueil-Crotanoy is buried. A mural tablet records the names, and the manner of death, of the two sons. Also a line in Latin:

" 'Tis better to die young than to live on to behold the misfortunes and emptiness of an ancient house."

XIV

JIM'S PUP

Jim Misterton was a quiet, reserved fellow, who had come straight to Paradise from a desk in some dingy London counting-house. He told us that something was wrong with his lungs, and that the simple life had been prescribed. He was very green, very sanguine, and engaged to be married—a secret confided to us later, when acquaintance had ripened into friendship. Every Sunday Jim would ride down to our ranch, sup with us, and smoke three pipes upon the verandah, describing at great length the process of transmuting the wilderness into a garden. He built a small board-and-batten house, planted a vineyard and orchard, bought a couple of cows and an incubator. Reserved about matters personal to himself, he never grew tired of describing his possessions, nor of speculating in regard to their possibilities. If ever a man counted his chickens before the eggs had been placed in the incubator, Jim Misterton was he.

Ajax and I listened in silence to these outpourings. Ajax contended—perhaps rightly—that Misterton's optimism was part of the "cure." He bade me remark the young fellow's sparkling eyes and ruddy cheeks.

"He calls that forsaken claim of his Eden," said my brother. "Shall we tell him what sort of a Hades it really is?"

One day, some months after this, we rode up to Eden. It presented the usual heart-breaking appearance so familiar to men who have lived in a wild country and witnessed, year after year, the furious struggle between Man and Nature. Misterton had cleared and planted about forty acres, enclosed with a barb-wire fence. Riding along this, we saw that many of his fruit trees had been barked and ruined by jack-rabbits. The month was September. A rainless summer had dried up a spring near his house, which, against our advice, he had attempted to develop by tunnelling. The new chicken-yards held no chickens.

Nevertheless, Jim welcomed us with a cheery smile. He had made mistakes, of course—who didn't? But he intended to come out on top, you bet your life! Western slang flowed freely from his lips. The blazing sun, which already had cracked the unpainted shingles on his roof, had bleached the crude blue of his jumper and overalls. His sombrero might have belonged to a veteran cowboy. Jim wore it with a rakish list to port, and round his neck fluttered a small, white silk handkerchief. He looked askance at our English breeches and saddles. Then he said pleasantly, " I've taken out my naturalisation papers."

After lunch, he told us about his Angela, and displayed her photograph.

" She's coming out," he added shyly, " as soon as I've got things fixed."

" Coming out ? " we repeated in amazement.

" It's all settled," said Jim. " I'm to meet her in 'Frisco ; we shall be married, and then I'm going to bring her here for the honeymoon. Won't it be larks ? "

Ajax answered, without any enthusiasm, " Won't it ? " and stared at the young, pretty face smiling up at him.

" Angela is as keen about this place as I am," continued the fond and beaming Jim. "It's going to be Eden for her too, God bless her!"

Ajax said thoughtfully, "Misterton, you're a lucky devil!"

We gleaned a few more details. Angela was the daughter of a doctor at Surbiton, and apparently a damsel of accomplishments. She could punt, play tennis, dance, sing, and make her own blouses; in a word, a "ripper," "top-hole," and no mistake! Ajax slightly raised his brows when we learned that the course of true love had run smooth; but the doctor's blessing was adequately accounted for—Angela had five sisters.

"But when your lungs went wrong——?"

Misterton laughed.

"Being a doctor, you see—and a devilish clever chap—he knew that I'd be as right as rain out here. 'If you want Angela,' he said, 'you must go full steam for fresh air and sunshine.'"

Riding home through the cactus and manzanita Ajax said irritably, "Is there any Paradise on earth without a fool in it?"

. . . .

The following spring, Angela came out. We attended the wedding, Ajax assisting as best man. Afterwards, somewhat reluctantly, we agreed that Angela's photograph had aroused expectations not quite satisfied. She was very pretty, but her manners were neither of the town nor of the country. Ajax said, "There must be hundreds like her in Upper Tooting; that's where she ought to live."

Because I was more than half assured of this, I made a point of disputing it.

"She's plastic, anyway; a nice little thing."

"Is a nice little thing the right sort of a wife for a squatter?"

"If she loves him——"

"Of course she loves him—now."

" Look at her pluck in coming out ! "

" Pluck ? She has five sisters in Upper Tooting."

" Surbiton."

" I'm sure it's Upper Tooting."

" And she can make her own blouses."

" Can she cook, can she milk a cow, can she keep a house clean ? "

" Give her time ! "

" Time ? I'd like to give her father six months. What's the use of jawing ? We've been aiding and abetting a crime. We might have prevented this slaughter of the innocents. What will that skin be like in one year from now ? "

" If she were sallow, you would be less excited."

We spent a few days in San Francisco ; and then we returned to the ranch to give a luncheon in the bride's honour. The table was set under some splendid live-oaks in the home-pasture, which, in May, presents the appearance of a fine English park. A creek tinkled at our feet, and beyond, out of the soft, lavender-coloured haze, rose the blue peaks of the Santa Lucia mountains.

" Reminds one a little of the Old Country," I remarked to Angela, who was all smiles and quite conscious of being the most interesting object in the landscape.

" Oh, please, don't speak of England ! "

Her pretty forehead puckered, and her mouth drooped piteously. Then she laughed, as she launched into a vivid description of her first attempt to bake bread. Whenever she spoke, I saw Jim's large, slightly prominent eyes fix themselves upon her face. His beaming satisfaction in everything she did or said would have been delightful had I been able to wean my thoughts from the place which he still believed to be—Eden. At intervals I heard him murmur, " This is rippin' ! "

After luncheon, Angela asked to see the ranch-house, and almost as soon as we were out of hearing, she said with disconcerting abruptness—

"Does your ranch pay?" She added half-apologetically, "I do so want to know."

"It doesn't pay," I answered grimly.

"You are not going—behind?" she faltered, using the familiar phrase of the country in which she had spent as yet but three weeks.

"We are going behind," I answered, angry with her curiosity: not old enough or experienced enough to see beneath it fear and misery. Angela said nothing more till we passed into the house. Then, with lack-lustre eyes, she surveyed our belongings, murmuring endless commonplace phrases. Presently she stopped opposite a photograph of a girl in Court dress.

"What a lovely frock!" she exclaimed, with real interest. "I do wish I'd been presented at Court. Who is she? Oh, a cousin. I wonder you can bear to look at her."

Without another word she burst into tears, heart-breaking sobs, the more vehement because obviously she was trying to suppress them. I stared at her, helpless with dismay, confronted for the first time with an emergency which seemed to paralyse rather than stimulate action. Had I sympathised, had I presented any aspect other than that of the confounded idiot, she might have become hysterical. Without doubt, my impassivity pulled her together. The sobs ceased, and she said with a certain calmness—

"I couldn't help it. You and your brother have this splendid ranch; you have experience, capital, everything looks so prosperous, and yet you are going—*behind*. And if that is the case, what is to become of us?"

"I dare say things will brighten up a bit."

"Brighten up?" She laughed derisively. "That's the worst of it. The brightness is appalling. These hard, blue skies without a cloud in them, this everlasting sunshine—how I loathe it!"

Again I became tongue-tied.

"Jim thinks it *is* Eden. When he showed me that ugly hut, and his sickly fruit trees, and that terrible little garden where every flower seemed to be protesting against its existence, I had to make-believe that it was Eden to me. Each day he goes off to his work, and he always asks the same question: 'You won't be lonesome, little woman, will you?' and I answer, 'No.' But I am lonesome, so lonesome that I should have gone mad if I hadn't found someone—you—to whom I could speak out."

"I'm frightfully sorry," I stammered.

"Thanks. I know you are. And your brother is sorry, and everybody else, too. The women, my neighbours in the brush-hills, look at me with the same question in their eyes: 'What are you doing here?' they say.

"How impertinent!"

"Pertinent, I call it."

From that moment I regarded her with different eyes. If she had brains to measure obstacles, she might surmount them, for brains in a new country are the one possession which adversity increases.

"Mrs. Misterton," I said slowly, "you are in a tight place, and I won't insult your intelligence by calling it by a prettier name; but you can pull yourself and Jim out of it, and I believe you will."

"Thanks," she said soberly.

For some weeks after this we saw little of the Mistertons. Then Jim rode down to the ranch with an exciting piece of news.

"I've got a pup coming out."

A "pup" in California means a young English gentleman, generally the fool of the family, who pays a premium to some fellow-countryman in return for board and lodging and the privilege of learning not so much how to do things as how not to do them—the latter being the more common object-lesson afforded him. Ajax and I had gleaned experience with pups, and we had long ago determined that no premium was adequate compensation for the task and responsibility of breaking them in. Jim went into details.

"It's Tomlinson-Thorpe. You fellows have heard of him, of course?"

"Never," said Ajax.

"The International! You ought to see him go through a scrum with half a dozen fellows on his back."

"A footballer," said my brother thoughtfully.

"One of the best. Naturally he puts on a little side. He has money, and I told him he could double it in a year or two."

"*You* told him that? Have you doubled your capital, Jim?"

"Well—er—no. But I'm rather a Juggins. Thorpe is as 'cute as they make 'em."

"A man of mind and muscle," murmured Ajax.

"And my greatest pal," added the enthusiastic James.

. . . .

Both Ajax and I took a profound dislike to Tomlinson-Thorpe the moment we set eyes upon him. He presented what is worst in the Briton abroad—a complacent aggressivenees tempered by a condescension which nothing but a bullet can lay low. But undeniably he was specially designed to go through scrums or Kitchen Lancers, the admired of all beholders.

"A schoolgirl's darling," growled the injudicious Ajax.

"Nothing of the sort," retorted Jim. "I mean," he added, "that Thorpe appeals to—er—mature women. I know for a fact that the wife of a baronet is head over ears in love with him."

"I hope he didn't tell you so," said Ajax.

"I should think not. First and last he's a gentleman."

During the next few weeks we had abundant opportunity of testing this assertion, for Thorpe was kind enough to consume much of our time and provisions. He bought himself a smart pony, and, very accurately turned out, would canter down to the ranch-house three or four times a week."

"There's nothing to learn up there," he explained.

It is fair to add that he helped us on the range, and exhibited aptitude in the handling of cattle and horses.

Meanwhile, his advent had made an enormous difference to the Mistertons. Jim fetched a hired girl from town, and Angela was relieved, during a scorching summer, of a housewife's most intolerable duties. Also, when Jim was hard at work clearing his brush-hills, wrestling with refractory roots of chaparral and manzanita, his greatest pal was kind enough to undertake the entertainment of Angela. The pair rode about together, and Jim told us that it did his heart good to see how the little woman had brightened up. Thorpe, for his part, admitted with becoming modesty that he was most awfully sorry for his friend's wife.

"My heart bleeds for her," he told Ajax.

"The bounder with the bleeding heart," said Ajax to me that same evening.

"We don't know that he is a bounder," I objected.

"He bounds, and he is as unconscious of his bounds as a kangaroo. As for Jim, he is the apex of the world's pyramid of fools."

"Angela can take care of herself."

"Can she?"

At our fall round-up, Ajax's question was answered. Conspicuously Angela attached herself to Tomlinson-Thorpe, regardless of the gaping eyes and mouths of neighbours, Puritan to the backbone in everything except the stealing of unbranded calves.

Most unfortunately, Thorpe—I think more kindly of him when I don't give him his double-barrelled name—was daily exhibiting those qualities which had carried him through scrums. In a bar-room brawl with two pot-valiant cowboys, he had come out supremely "on top." They had jeered at his riding-breeches, at his bob-tailed cob, at his English accent, and Thorpe had suffered them gladly. Then, quite suddenly, Angela's name fell upon a silence. As suddenly Thorpe seized both men, one in each hand, and brought their heads together with a crash which the barkeeper described afterwards as "splendiferous." With an amazing display of physical violence, he flung them apart, each falling in a crumpled heap of profanity upon the floor.

"Don't fool with that feller," was the verdict in the foothills.

The affair would have been of no consequence had not Jim been present when the row took place. Jim might have played the *beau rôle* had he carried a pistol. Admittedly he would have been licked in a fight with either cowboy singly. Thorpe, so I was told, entreated Jim to keep the story from his wife. Angela had it, with slight exaggeration, from the hero-worshipper's lips within an hour. "It brought her heart into her mouth, I tell you," the simple fellow told Ajax, and later Ajax murmured to me: "I wonder whether it struck Angela that Jim would have tackled both of 'em, if Thorpe had not interfered."

A dozen trifles hardly worth recording emphasised the difference between Jim and his greatest pal. Thorpe mastered the colt which had thrown Jim; Thorpe, when fresh meat was wanted, killed handsomely the fat buck missed by the over-eager James; Thorpe made a pretty profit over a hog deal at the psychological moment when poor Misterton allowed three Poland-China sows to escape through an improperly constructed fence!

Thorpe was a man. Did Angela think of Jim as a mouse?

. . . .

After the fall round-up, Ajax and I spent a month fishing in British Columbia. When we got back to the ranch, one of the first to greet us happened to be Jim Misterton. He looked so pale and thin that I thought for a moment his old enemy had attacked him. However, he assured us that he was perfectly well, but unable to sleep properly. We asked him to stay to supper, rather as a matter of form, for he had always refused our invitations unless Angela were included. To our surprise he accepted.

"He'll uncork himself after the second pipe," said the sage Ajax.

He did. And, oddly enough, our cousin's photograph in Court dress moved him as it had moved his wife.

"Boys," he said, "I'm the biggest fool that ever came to this burnt-up wilderness; and I'm a knave because I persuaded the sweetest girl in England to join me."

Oil may calm troubled waters, but it feeds flames. We said something, nothing worth repeating; then Jim stood up, trembling with agitation, waving his briar pipe (which had gone out), cursing himself and the brazen skies, and the sterile soil, and the jack-rabbits, and barb-wire, and his spring, now a pool of stagnant mud. When he had finished—and how his tongue must have ached!—Ajax said quietly—

"Were you any good as a clerk?"

Jim nodded sullenly.

"I knew my business, of course. Heavens! what a soft job that was compared to what I've tackled out here!"

"It might be possible to find another such job in California. You never thought of that?"

Jim's face brightened.

"Never," he declared. "Fresh air and exercise was the prescription—and I'm fed up on both. If I could get a billet as clerk in San Lorenzo, if——" He clenched his fists, unable to articulate another word, then, very slowly, he went on: "Boys, I'd give my life to get Angela away from Paradise."

"We'll help you," said Ajax.

"Mrs. Misterton would be much happier in San Lorenzo," I added.

Jim flushed scarlet.

"Angela married the wrong man," he said deliberately.

Ajax interrupted.

"Jim, fill your pipe!"

He held out his pouch, which Jim waved aside.

"She married the wrong man," he repeated, "and that is what is keeping me awake nights. She'd have been happy with Thorpe. He could have given her all the little things women value."

"And how about the great things?"

"The little things are great things—to her. Good-night, boys." We shook hands and he went to the door. On the threshold he turned a tired face towards us. "I hope I haven't given you fellows the idea that Angela isn't the best little woman on earth. She never complains. And Thorpe has been a pal in ten thousand. His heart simply bleeds for Angela. So long!"

Ajax mixed a stiff tumbler. Before he put it to his lips he looked at me. "If that bounder's heart would bleed and bleed and bleed to death, I should not cross the road to fetch a doctor."

. . . .

About a fortnight later the annual County Fair was held outside San Lorenzo. We drove to the Buena Vista Hotel, and, to our surprise, upon the broad verandah we discovered Angela, in the last of her pretty dresses, and Thorpe. Angela explained matters. Jim and she were Thorpe's guests for the week. They were going to the races, to the ball, to all the shows. She finished breathlessly—

"And there's a captive balloon!"

Thorpe added, "Jim is rather blue, you know."

As soon as we were alone, Ajax said savagely—

"Do you think Jim understands?"

"Understands what?"

"Oh, don't pretend! We know our Thorpe by this time. He's a cutlet-for-a-cutlet fellow. What do I say? A cutlet-for-a-baron-of-beef gentleman. Hang him!"

"But Angela——"

"Angela is a reckless little idiot. She's been starving for a lark, and she's swallowed it without counting the cost."

"But I trust her," said I; "and Jim is here."

Ajax shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

Next day, at the races, Jim attached himself to us, while aloft in the grand-stand Angela sat with Thorpe: the handsomest couple at the Fair. For the moment, at any rate, Angela was enjoying herself; Jim, on the other hand, looked miserable. Contrast had discoloured the good time. He couldn't snatch pleasure out of the present because he saw so plainly the future.

"I'm a wet blanket," he said dolefully. "Every time Angela laughs I want to cry, and yet I ought to be thankful that old Thorpe can give her what I can't."

"He's doing the thing well," said Ajax meaningly.

"He has been left a bit more money. Didn't he tell you? No? And he's going to buy that big tract to the north-west of us. Mum's the word, but—between ourselves—the agreement is signed."

"Oh!" said Ajax.

The big tract in question belonged to a bank, whose president, a very good fellow, was our particular friend. Early next morning I paid him a visit. Almost immediately he asked me questions about Thorpe, which I was able to answer satisfactorily from a business point of view.

"Mr. Thorpe struck me as a very shrewd young man. He'll get there."

"He played football for England."

"Ah! Well, indirectly, I suppose, we can thank you for this deal."

"You can thank Jim Misterton and his wife."

"I have not the pleasure of knowing them. They had something to do with this, eh?"

"Everything."

The president frowned; his voice was not quite so pleasant as he said—

"Are they likely to claim a commission?"

"Certainly not. All the same, something is due. Without the Mistertons you would never have sold this ranch to Thorpe. One moment. It is in your power to do these people a service, and it will cost you nothing. Jim Misterton was a clerk in London, and a capable one, but his health broke down. He came out here to the brush-hills. He got back his health, but he's lost everything else. Give him a place in this bank. He 's straight as a string, and he knows his work."

Before I left the bank it was understood that Jim was to call upon the president and submit his credentials. Humanly speaking, the billet was secured. Nothing remained but to find Jim. To my surprise, however, Ajax urged me to wait a few hours.

" I want to see Jim's honest grin again as much as you do, but we must tell him before Thorpe. When I upset an apple-cart, I like to see the apples rolling about, don't you ? "

" We'll tell 'em after dinner to-night."

That afternoon we forgathered in the Fair Grounds. The racing was uninteresting, and presently Angela suggested that we should go up in the captive balloon. We had watched it ascending and descending with interest. Some of our friends bored us by describing at too great length the panoramic splendour of the view. Angela and Ajax wanted to soar, Thorpe and I preferred Mother Earth ; to Jim was offered the casting vote. He spun a dollar to decide, and within a few minutes the five of us were seated in the wicker-car. I remember that our aeronaut inspired confidence in Angela because he wore the Grand Army medal. A windlass and a donkey-engine controlled the big rope which held us captive. We went aloft in a series of disagreeable and upsetting jerks. This may be an unusual experience, but it was ours. I am a bad sailor, and so is Ajax. Neither of us smiled when Thorpe addressed the veteran as—" Steward ! "

Suddenly there came a still sharper jerk, and the cable split. The balloon seemed to leap upwards, swerved like a frightened bird, and then, caught by the wind, sailed upward and seaward, swooping on with a paradoxically smooth yet uneven flight.

" Jeeroosalem ! " ejaculated our aeronaut. Then he added coolly enough : " Sit tight ; you'll none of you be the worse for this little trip."

His confidence diffused itself agreeably. Angela laughed, Thorpe's face relaxed, Jim peered over the edge of the car.

"Gad!" said he, "we seem to be going a tremendous pace."

The veteran took a squint alow and aloft as he fingered the rope that opened the valve. Next time he spoke the confidence had leaked from his voice, leaving behind a nervous squeak.

"This yere valve won't work!"

"Oh!" said Angela.

She looked at Thorpe as if seeking from him some word, some sign, of comfort and encouragement. At the same moment she made an instinctive movement towards him. Jim was staring at her, very pale. I saw him half-open his lips and then close them. Frightened as I was, I can swear that Jim was thinking only of his wife and what he could read upon her face. Thorpe was quite impassive, but his fingers were twitching. Then I heard Jim's voice curiously distinct—

"What are you going to do?"

"The valve may work loose. Anyways, she leaks a bit. Guess we're all right."

Once more his confidence diffused itself subtly, and again a phrase shattered it.

"How far is San Lorenzy from the ocean?"

"Eleven miles," said Ajax.

"We're sailin' plumb into the fog."

In late October the sea fog generally begins to roll up about four o'clock. If the breeze is from the land, the fog is kept at bay for an hour or two. As a rule, the breeze fails, and then the fog asserts its dominion over all things on land and sea. Without knowing much of aerial navigation, I grasped the fact that we were being swept into the fog, and that if we intended to descend on land there was not a minute to be lost. Thorpe, I fancy, had arrived at the same conclusion. He said in a queer, high-pitched tone—

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" Can't you stick a knife into the balloon ? "

" It ain't easy, and it's mighty risky."

Jerking at the two ropes in his hands, he spoke collectedly, in an indifferent tone—the tone of a man who has confronted death often, who realises his impotence, who submits apathetically to impending fate, whether good or ill.

" It's very cold," said Angela. Jim began to unbutton his jacket. " Don't," she said sharply ; " all the coats in the world wouldn't warm me."

" Stick a knife into the confounded thing," repeated Thorpe.

" S'pose you do it," said the veteran snappishly.

Thorpe stood up at once, staggered, and fell upon the floor of the car. He could master a broncho, but he had never attempted to boss a balloon. The old man smiled.

" A man," said he, " may be mighty smart on land and behave like a baby in a balloon. You sit tight, mister."

The balloon was now careening like a racing-yacht in a squall. We had met opposing currents of air in the debatable area where wind and fog struggled for the mastery. The fog had the mighty trade wind behind it, forcing it landward. Already we were approaching the sand-dunes, the very spot for an easy descent if we could descend.

" Gosh, I've done it ! "

Above I could hear the soft, sibilant sound of the escaping gas, not unlike the hiss of a snake. I was also sensible that my heart, not to mention other important organs, was trying to get into my throat.

" Valve must ha' bust," said the old man. " Stand by to throw out ballast."

The bottom of the car was covered with sacks of sand. Ordinarily one unties the sacks and the sand is allowed to trickle out in a harmless stream.

I peered over the side. The balloon was now, so to speak, on an even keel, falling almost perpendicularly. I saw, far down, a flash of blue.

"Chuck 'em out, boys!"

Several sacks went overboard, and at once my solar plexus felt easier. Again I peered down and saw nothing. The fog had engulfed us, but I could hear the crash of the big combers as they broke upon the rocks to the north of Avila.

What followed took place within a few seconds. We were encompassed by thick dank fog. The balloon was perfectly steady, descending less quickly, but with inexorable certainty, into the ocean. Around, an uncanny silence encompassed us; above, we could hear the hiss of the serpent; below, the menacing roar of the breakers. Then the old man said curtly—

"Hurry up, boys. If we can get her up again, we may just strike the dunes. What wind there is blows from the west."

We threw out the rest of the sacks. The balloon rose and slowly sank again. The old man took off his coat.

"I can't swim worth a cent," he muttered grimly, "but I'm a-going to try. If she tumbles quietly into the water, the wind may blow us ashore."

A few more seconds passed. I heard a queer noise and discovered that my teeth were chattering. Thorpe was taking off his boots.

The next moment the balloon gave a tremendous bound. I know that I nearly fell upon my face, and Angela was thrown violently into the bottom of the car. For an appreciable interval not one of us realised that Jim had slipped overboard.

"The trade's got us," said the old man. "We shall just make them dunes."

"Oh, thank God!" exclaimed Angela.

By the tone of her voice, by the smile parting her lips, I could see that she did not know what had happened. Terror had dulled all faculties save the one overmastering instinct of self-preservation. Thorpe was about to speak, but Ajax caught his eye and with a gesture silenced him. Once more the balloon began to fall—

. . . .

We were thrown out upon the dunes. Some of us were badly bruised. When we staggered to our feet, Angela said quickly—

"Why, where's Jim ?"

Thorpe told her ; let us give him credit for that. When he had finished, he put out his hand, but she turned from him to Ajax.

"Come," she said.

She ran past us towards the beach, instinctively taking the right direction. As she ran she called shrilly : "Jim—Jim !"

Ajax followed. For an instant Thorpe and I were alone, face to face.

"Why did he do it ?" he asked.

"Because he thought that Angela had married the wrong man ; but she—didn't."

When I caught Ajax up, Angela was still ahead, running like a mad creature.

"Jim never took off his boots," said Ajax.

"Nor his coat."

"All the same, the love of life is strong."

"We don't know how far he was from the water ; the fall may have killed him."

"I feel in my bones that he is not dead, and that Angela will find him."

We pressed on, unwilling to be outstripped by a woman, but sensible that we were running ourselves to a standstill. The fog was thicker near the water's edge, and Angela's figure loomed through the mist like that of a wraith, but we still heard her piteous cry : "Jim—Jim !"

We were nearly spent when we overtook her.

She had stopped where the foam from the breakers lay thick upon the sand.

"Listen!" she said.

We heard nothing but our thumping hearts and the raucous note of some sea-bird.

"He answered me!" she asserted with conviction. "There!"

Certainly my ears caught a faint cry to the left. We ran on, forgetting our bruises. Again Angela called, and out of the mist beyond the breakers came an answering voice. We shouted back and plunged into the surf. Angela knelt down upon the sand.

Afterwards we admitted that Angela had saved his life, although Jim could not have fought his way through the breakers without our help. Indeed, when we got him ashore, I made certain that he was dead. Had Angela's instinct or intuition failed, had she hesitated for a few minutes, Jim would have drowned within a few hundred yards of the spot where the balloon struck. Since, Jim has maintained that he was sinking when he heard her voice; her faint, attenuated tones infused strength into his limbs and hope into his heart.

We dined together, and I delivered the president's message in Thorpe's presence. He shook hands with Jim, and said quietly—

"I am happier to-night than I ever expected to be again."

Bounder or not, he meant it.

Only the other day I received a letter from Angela. She wrote at length concerning her eldest child, my godson, and she mentioned incidentally that Jim was now cashier of the San Lorenzo Bank.

XV

MARY

HIS real name was Quong Wo, but my brother Ajax always called him Mary, because the boy's round, childish face had a singular smoothness and delicacy. A good and faithful servant he proved during three years. Then he ran away at the time of the anti-Chinese riots, despite our assurance that we wished to keep him and protect him.

"Me no likee Coon Dogs," said he, with a shiver.

The Coon Dogs were a pack of cowboys engaged in hunting Chinamen out of the peaceful, but sometimes ill-smelling, places which, by thrift, patience, and unremitting labour, they had made peculiarly their own. From the Coon Dogs Ajax and I received a letter commanding us to discharge Mary. A skull and cross-bones, and a motto, "Beware the bite of the Coon Dogs!" embellished this billet, which was written in red ink. Courtesy constrained us to acknowledge the receipt of it. Next day we put up a sign by the corral gate—

NO HUNTING ALLOWED ON THIS RANCH!

In the afternoon Mary disappeared.

Uncle Jake was of opinion that Mary had divined the meaning of our sign. He had said to Uncle Jake: "I go. Me makee heap trouble for boss."

Later, upon the same day, we learned from a neighbour that the Coon Dogs had tarred and feathered one poor wretch; another had been stripped and whipped; a third was found half-strangled by his own queue; the market-gardens near San Lorenzo, miracles of industry, had been ravaged and destroyed. Before taking leave our neighbour mentioned the sign.

"Boys," said he, "take that down—and ship Mary. I'm mighty glad," he added reflectively, "that my ole woman does the cookin."

"Mary skedaddled after dinner," said Ajax, frowning, "but I'm going into town to-morrow to bring him back."

However, Mary brought himself back that same night. We were smoking our second pipes after supper, when Ajax, pointing an expressive finger at the window, exclaimed sharply: "Great Scot! What's that?"

Pressed against the pane, glaring in at us, was a face—a face so blanched and twisted by terror and pain that it seemed scarcely human. We hurried out. Mary staggered towards us. In his face were the cruel, venomous spines of the prickly pear. The tough boughs of the manzanita thickets through which he had plunged had scourged him like a cat-o'-nine tails. What clothes he wore were dripping with mud and slime.

"Coon Dogs come," he gasped. "I tellee you."

Then he bolted into the shadows of the oaks and sage brush. We pursued, but he ran fast, dodging like a rabbit, till he tumbled over and over—paralysed by fear and fatigue. We carried him back to the ranch-house, propped him up in a chair, and despatched Uncle Jake for a doctor. Before midnight we learned what little there was to know. Mary had been chased by the Coon Dogs. He, of course, was a-foot; the cowboys were mounted. A couple of barbed-wire fences had saved him from capture. We had listened, that afternoon, too coolly, perhaps, to a tale of many outrages, but the horror and infamy of them were not brought home to us till we saw Mary, tattered scarred, bedraggled, lying crumpled up against the gay chintz of the arm-chair. The poor fellow kept muttering: " Coon Dogs come. I know. Killee you, killee me. Heap bad men! "

Next morning Uncle Jake and the doctor rode up.

" I can do nothing," said the latter, presently. " It's a case of shock. He may get over it; he may not. Another shock would kill him. I'll leave some medicine."

Upon further consultation we put Mary into Ajax's bed. The Chinaman's bunk-house was isolated, and the vaqueroes slept near the horse corral, a couple of hundred yards away. Mary feebly protested: " No likee. Coon Dogs—allee same debils—killee you, killee me. Heap bad men! "

We tried to assure him that the Coon Dogs were at heart rank curs. Mary shook his head: " I know. You see."

The day passed. Night set in. About ten, Mary said, convincingly—

" Coon Dogs coming! Coon Dogs coming! "

" No, no," said Ajax.

I slipped out of the house From the marsh beyond the creek came the familiar croaking of the frogs; from the foothills in the cow-pasture came the shrilling of the crickets. A coyote was yapping far down the valley.

" It's all right, Mary," said I.

" Boss, Coon Dogs come, velly quick. I know."

Did he really know? What subtle instinct warned him of the approach of danger? Who can answer such questions? It is a fact that the Coon Dogs were on the road to our ranch, and that they arrived just one hour later. We heard them yelling and shouting at the big gate. Then the popping of pistols told us that the sign, clearly to be seen in the moonlight, was being riddled with bullets.

" We must face the music," said Ajax grimly. " Come on ! "

Mary lay back on the pillow, senseless.

Passing through the sitting-room, I reminded Ajax that my duck-gun, an eight-bore, could carry two ounces of buck-shot about one hundred yards.

"We mustn't fight 'em with their own weapons," he answered curtly.

The popping ceased suddenly; silence succeeded.

" They're having their bad time, too," said Ajax. " They are hitching their plugs to the fence. Hullo ! "

Uncle Jake slipped on to the verandah, six-shooter in hand. Before he spoke, he spat contemptuously ; then he drawled out : " Our boys say it's none o' their doggoned business ; they won't interfere."

" Good," said Ajax cheerfully. " Nip back, Uncle ; we can play this hand alone."

" Sure ? " The old man's voice expressed doubt.

" Quite sure. Shush—h—h ! "

Uncle Jake slid off the verandah, but he retired —so we discovered later—no farther than the water-butt behind it Ajax and I went into the sitting-room. From the bed-room beyond came no sound whatever. Through the windows the pack was seen—slowly advancing.

" Come in, gentlemen," said Ajax loudly.

He stood in the doorway, an unarmed man confronting a dozen desperadoes.

" Wheer's the Chinaman—Quong ? "

I recognised the voice of a cowboy whom we had employed: a man known in the foothills as Cock-a-whoop Charlie.

"He's here," Ajax answered quietly.

A tall, gaunt Missourian, also well known to us as a daring bull-puncher, laughed derisively.

"Here—is he? Wal, we want him, but we don't want no fuss with you, boys. Yer—white, but he's yaller, and he must go."

"He is going," said Ajax. "He's going fast."

"How's that?"

"Come in," retorted my brother impatiently. "It's cold out there and dark. You're not scared of two unarmed men—are you?"

They filed into the house, looking very sheepish.

"I'm glad you've come, even at this late hour," said Ajax, "for I want to have a quiet word with you."

The psychological characteristics of a crowd are receiving attention at the hands of a French philosopher. M. Gustave Le Bon tells us that the crowd is always intellectually inferior to the isolated individual of average brains.

"You have a nerve," remarked Cock-a-whoop Charlie.

"You Coon Dogs," continued my brother, "are making this county too hot for the Chinese—eh?"

"You bet yer life!"

"But won't you make it too hot for yourselves?"

The pack growled, inarticulate with astonishment and curiosity.

"Some of you," said Ajax, "have wives and children. What will they do when the Sheriff is hunting—you? You call this the Land of the Free, the Home of the Brave. So it is. And do you think that the Free and the Brave will suffer you to destroy property and life without calling you to account?"

"We ain't destroying life."

" And a heathen Chinee ain't a man."

" Quong," said Ajax, in his deep voice, " is hardly a man yet. We call him Mary, because he looks like a girl. You want him—eh ? " You are not satisfied with what you did yesterday ? You want him ? But—do you want him *dying* ? "

The pack cowered.

" He is dying," said Ajax. " No matter how they live, and a wiser Judge than any of us will pronounce on that, no matter how they live—are your own lives clean ?—the meanest of these Chinese knows how to die. One moment, please."

He entered the room where Mary lay blind and deaf to the terror which had come at last. When Ajax returned, he said quietly : " Come and see the end of what you began. What ? You hang back ? By God !—you shall come."

Dominated by his eye and voice, the pack slunk into the bed-room. Upon Mary's once comely face the purple weals were criss-crossed ; and sores had broken out wherever the cactus spines had pierced the flesh. A groan escaped the men who had wrought this evil, and glancing at each in turn, I caught a glimpse of a quickening remorse, of a horror about to assume colossal dimensions. The Cock-a-whoop cowboy was seized with a palsy ; great tears rolled down the cheeks of the gaunt Missourian ; one man began to swear incoherently, cursing himself and his fellows ; another prayed aloud.

" He's dead ! " shrieked Charlie.

At the grim word, moved by a common impulse, whipped to unreasonable panic as they had been whipped to unreasoning cruelty, the pack broke headlong from the room—and fled !

Long after they had gone, Mary opened his eyes.

" Coon Dogs coming ? " he muttered. " Heap bad men ! "

"They have come and gone," said Ajax. "They'll never come again, Mary. It's all right. Go to sleep."

Mary obediently closed his eyes.

"He'll recover," Ajax said. And he did.

XVI

OLD MAN BOBO'S MANDY

OLD man Bobo was the sole survivor of a once famous trio. Two out of the three, Doc Dickson and Pap Spooner, had passed to the shades, and the legend ran that when their disembodied spirits reached the banks of Styx, the ruling passion of their lives asserted itself for the last time. They demurred loudly, impatiently, at the exorbitant fee, ten cents, demanded by Charon.

" We weigh light," said Pap Spooner, " awful light ! Call it, mister, fifteen cents for the two ! "

" Ten cents apiece," replied the ferryman, " or three for a quarter."

Thereupon the worthy couple seated themselves in Cimmerian darkness, and vowed their intention of awaiting old man Bobo.

" He'll soon be along," they remarked. " He must be awful lonesome."

But the old gentleman kept them out of Hades for full five years.

He lived alone with his grand-daughter and a stable helper in the tumble-down adobe just to the left of the San Lorenzo race track. The girl cooked, baked, and washed for him. Twice a week she peddled fruit and garden stuff in San Lorenzo. Of these sales her grandsire exacted the most rigorous accounting, and occasionally, in recognition of her services, would fling her a nickel. The old man himself rarely left home, and might be seen at all hours hobbling around his garden and corrals, keenly interested in his own belongings, halter-breaking his colts, anxiously watching the growth of his lettuce, counting the oranges, and beguiling the fruitful hours with delightful calculation.

" It's all profit," he has often said to me. " We buy nothin' an' we sell every durned thing we raise."

Then he would chuckle and rub together his yellow, wrinkled hands. Ajax said that whenever Mr. Bobo laughed it behooved other folk to look grave.

" Mandy's dress costs something," I observed.

" Considerable,—I'd misremembered that. Her rig-out las' fall cost me the vally o' three boxes o' apples—winter pearmains ! "

" She will marry soon, Mr. Bobo."

" An' leave me ? " he cried shrilly. " I'd like to see a man prowlin' around my Mandy — I'd stimilate him. Besides, mister, Mandy ain't the marryin' kind. She's homely as a mud fence, is Mandy. She ain't put up right for huggin' and kissin'."

" But she is your heiress, Mr. Bobo."

" Heiress," he repeated with a cunning leer. " I'm poor, mister, poor. The tax collector has eat me up—eat me up, I say, eat me up ! "

He looked such an indigestible morsel, so obviously unfit for the maw of even a tax collector, that I laughed and took my leave. He was worth, I had reason to know, at least fifty thousand dollars.

. . . .

" Say, Mandy, I like ye awful well ! D'ye know it ? "

The speaker, Mr. Rinaldo Roberts, trainer and driver of horses, was sitting upon the top rail of the fence that divided the land of old man Bobo from the property of the Race Track Association.

Mandy, freckled, long-legged, and tow-headed, balanced herself easily upon one ill-shod foot and rubbed herself softly with the other. The action to those who knew her ways denoted mental perplexity and embarrassment. This assignation was bristling with peril as well as charm. Her grandfather had the eyes of a turkey-buzzard, eyes which she contrasted involuntarily with the soft, kindly orbs now bent upon her. She decided instantly that blue was a prettier colour than yellow. Rinaldo's skin, too, commended itself. She had never seen so white a forehead, such ruddy cheeks. David, she reflected, must have been such a man ; but Rinaldo was a nicer name than David, ever so much nicer.

" Shakespeare never repeats," observed Mr. Roberts, " but I'll tell ye again, Mandy, that I like ye awful well."

" Pshaw ! " she replied.

" Honest, Mandy, I ain't lyin'."

He smoothed his hair, well oiled by the barber an hour before, wiped his hand upon his brown overalls, and laughed. The overalls were worn so as to expose four inches of black trouser.

" Ye think more of your sorrel than ye do of me, Nal."

" I do ? "

" Yes, indeed, you do. You know you do."

" I know I don't ! Say—I've gone an' christened the cuss."

" You have ? " said Mandy, in a tone of intense interest. " Tell me its name."

" It's a her, Mandy, an' me an' Pete fixed on *By-Jo*. That's French, Mandy," he added triumphantly, " an' it means a gem, a *jool*, an' that's what she is—a regler ruby ! "

" It don't sound like French," said Amanda doubtfully.

" That French feller," replied Nal, with the fine scorn of the Anglo-Saxon, " him as keeps the ' Last Chance ' saloon, pronounces it By-Jew, but he's as ignorant as a fool, an' By-Jo seems to come kind o' nateral."

" Ye might ha' called the filly, Amandy, Nal."

The honest face of Rinaldo flushed scarlet. He squirmed—I use the word advisedly—and nearly fell off the fence.

" If there was a nickel-in-the-slot kickin' machine around San Lorenzy," he cried, " I'd take a dollar dose right now ! Gosh ! What a clam I am ! I give ye my word, Mandy, that the notion o' callin' the filly after you never entered my silly head. Never onst ! *Jee*whillikins ! this makes me feel awful bad."

He wiped his broad forehead with a large white silk pocket-handkerchief, horribly scented with patchouli. His distress was quite painful to witness.

" Never mind," said Amanda softly. " I was only joking, Nal. It's all right."

Looking at her now, what son of Adam could call her homely ? Her slender figure, the head well poised upon shapely shoulders, suddenly straightened itself ; her red lips parted, revealing a row of small, white teeth ; her eyes were uplifted to meet the glance of her lover ; her bosom rose and fell as Nal sprang from the fence and seized her hand.

A simple courtship truly ! Love had written in plain characters upon their radiant faces an artless tale. With fingers interlaced they gazed tranquilly at each other, eloquently silent.

Then the man bent his head and kissed her.

. . . .

" Marry my Mandy ! " cried old man Bobo, a few hours later. " Why, Nal, ye must be crazy ! Ye're both children."

" I'm twenty-two," said Mr. Roberts, expanding his broad chest, and towering six inches at least above his companion, " an' Mandy will be eighteen next December, and," he added with dignity, "I love Mandy an' Mandy loves me."

" Now, I ain't a goin' to git mad," said Mr. Bobo, stamping upon the ground and gnashing his teeth, " but I'll give ye a pointer, Nal Roberts ; you go right home an' stay there ! I need Mandy the worst kind, an' ye know it. I couldn't spare the girl nohow. An' there's another thing ; I won't have no sparkin' aroun' this place. No huggin' an' kissin'. There's none for me an' there'll be none for you. Love, pah ! I reckon that's all ye've got. Love ! Ye make me sick to my stomach, Nal Roberts. Ye've bin readin' dime novels, that's what ails ye. Love ! There ain't no dividen's in love."

" Naterally," observed Mr. Roberts, " ye know nothin' of love, Mister Bobo, an' ye never will. I'm sorry for ye, too. Life without love is like eatin' bull-beef jerky without *salsa* ! "

" I've raised Mandy," continued Mr. Bobo, ignoring this interruption, " very keerful. I give her good schoolin', victuals, an' a heap o' clothes. I've knocked some horse sense into the child. There ain't no nonsense in Mandy, an' ye won't find her equal in the land for peddlin' fruit an' sech. I've kep' her rustlin' from morn till night. When a woman idles, the ole Nick gits away with her mighty quick. I've salted that down many a long year. No, sir, Mandy is mine, an' Mandy will do jest as I say. She minds me well, does Mandy. She won't marry till I give the word—an' I ain't agoin' to give the word."

He snapped his lantern jaws, and grinned in Nal's face. The selfishness which rated its sordid interest paramount to any consideration for others appalled the young man. How could he stem this tide of avarice, this torrent of egoism ?

"So love don't go?" said Nal shortly.

"No, sonny, love don't go—leastways not with me."

"Mebbe you think I'm after the grease," remarked Nal with deliberation, "but I ain't. Folks say ye're rich, Mr. Bobo, but I don't keer for that. I'm after Mandy, an' I'll take her in her chimmy."

"I'll be damned if ye will, Nal! Ye won't take Mandy at all, an' that's all there is about it."

"Say," said Mr. Roberts, his fine eyes aglow with inspiration, "say, I'll make ye a cold business proposition, fair an' square betwixt man an' man. I'll buy Mandy from ye, at the market price—there!"

From beneath his penthouse brows Mr. Bobo peered curiously at this singular youth.

"Buy her!" he repeated scornfully. "With what? Ye've got nothin', Nal Roberts—that is, nothin' but yer sorrel filly and a measly two, or three mebbe, hundred dollars. I vally Mandy at twenty dollars a month. At one per cent.—I allus git one per cent. a month—that makes two thousand dollars. Have ye got the cold cash, Nal?"

Honest Nal hung his head.

"Not the half of it, but I earn a hundred a month at the track."

"Bring me two thousand dollars, gold coin o' the United States, no foolin', an' I'll give ye Mandy."

"Ye mean that, Mr. Bobo?"

The old man hesitated.

"I was kind o' bluffin'," he admitted reluctantly, "but I'll stand by my words. Bring me the cash, an' I'll give ye Mandy."

"I'll guess I'll go," said Mr. Roberts.

"Yes, Nal, ye'd better go, an' sonny, ye needn't to come back; I like ye first rate, but ye needn't to come back!"

Rinaldo walked home to the race track, and as he walked, cursed old man Bobo, cursed him heartily, in copious Western vernacular, from the peaky crown of his bald head to the tip of his ill-shaped, sockless toe. When, however, he had fed the filly and bedded her down in cool, fresh straw, he felt easier in his mind. Running his hand down her iron forelegs, he reflected hopefully that a few hundred dollars were easily picked up on a race track. Bijou was a well-bred beast, with a marvellous turn of speed. For half-a-mile she was a wonder, a record breaker—so Nal thought. Presently he pulled a list of entries from his pocket and scanned it closely. Old man Bobo had a bay gelding in training for the half-mile race, Comet, out of Shooting Star, by Meteor. Nal had taken the measure of the other horses and feared none of them ; but Comet, he admitted ruefully to be a dangerous colt. He was stabled at home, and the small boy that exercised him was both deaf and dumb.

" If I could hold my watch on him," said Nal to himself, " I'd give a hundred dollars."

A smile illumined his pleasant features as he remembered that Mr. Bobo, like himself, was sitting upon the anxious seat. That same afternoon he had tried, in vain, to extract from Nal some information about the filly's speed. The old man's weakness, if he had one, was betting heavily upon a certainty.

" By Jimminy," mused Mr. Roberts, patting affectionately the satin neck of Bijou, " it would be a nice howdy-do to win a thousand off the old son of a gun ! Gosh, Mandy ! how ye startled me."

Amanda, out of breath and scarlet of face, slipped quietly into the loose box and sat down in the straw.

" Hush," she said, panting, " grandfather would take a quirt to me if he knew I was here, but, Nal dear, I jest had to come. I've been talkin' with the old man, an' he won't let me leave him, but I'll be true to you, Nal, true as steel, an' you'll be true to me, won't you? Grandfather won't last long, he's——"

"Tough," said Mr. Roberts, "tough as abalone, tough as the hondo of my lariat. I suspicioned he'd peter out when Pap Spooner died, but he fooled us the worst kind. No, Mandy, the old gentleman ain't a-goin', as he says, till he gits ready. He told me that to-day, an' he ain't a liar. He's close as a clam, is Mr. Bobo, but he ain't no liar. As for bein' true to you, Mandy—why—dern it—my heart's jest froze to yours, it don't belong to Nal Roberts no longer."

The girl blushed with pleasure and rose to her feet.

"You won't quarrel, Nal," she said anxiously, "you an' grandfather. He gets awful hot at times, but your head is level. He's comin' down to the track to-morrow morning at five to work out Comet, an' you might have words about me."

"To work out Comet?" said Nal, pricking up his ears.

"Mercy!—" cried Amanda, "I've given it away, an' it's a deathly secret."

"It's safe enough with me," replied the young man carelessly. None the less his eyes brightened and he smiled beneath his blonde mustache. "An', Mandy, don't worry, I wouldn't touch the old gentleman with a pair o' tongs."

"Well, good night, Nal—no, you mustn't—somebody might see. Only one then! Let me go, let me go!—Good night, Nal."

She ran swiftly away, holding high her skirts on account of the sticker grass. Nal watched her retreating figure admiringly.

"A good gait," he murmured critically, "no interferin' an' nothin' gummy about the pastern!"

He then squatted down, cowboy fashion, upon his hams, and smoothing carefully a piece of level ground, began to—what he called "figger." He wrote with a pointed stick and presently broke into a loud laugh.

"A low down trick," he muttered, "to play upon a white man, but Mr. Bobo ain't a white man, an' mustn't be treated as sech."

He erased his hieroglyphics, and proceeded leisurely to prepare his simple supper. He ate his bacon and beans with even more than usual relish, laughing softly to himself repeatedly, and when he had finished and the dishes were washed and put away, he selected, still laughing, a spade and crowbar from a heap of tools in the corner of his shanty. These he shouldered and then strode out into the night.

. . . .

The crowd at the race track upon the opening afternoon of the fair was beginning to assume colossal proportions—colossal, that is to say, for San Lorenzo. Beneath the grand stand, where the pools are always sold, the motley throng surged thickest. Jew and gentile, greaser and dude, tin-horn gamblers and tenderfeet, hayseeds and merchants, jostled each other good humouredly. In the pool box were two men. One—the auctioneer—a perfect specimen of the "sport"; a ponderous individual, brazen of face and voice, who presented to the crowd an amazing front of mottled face, diamond stud, bulging shirt sleeves, and a bull-neck encircled by a soiled eighteen-and-a-half inch paper collar. The other gentleman, who handled the tickets, was unclean, unshorn, and cadaverous-looking, with a black cigar, unlighted, stuck aggressively into the corner of his mouth.

"Once more," yelled the pool-selling person, in raucous tones. "Once more, boys! I'm sellin' once more the half-mile dash! I've one hundred dollars for Comet ; how much fer second choice ? Be lively there. Sixty dollars ! ! ! Go the five, five, five ! Thank ye, sir, you're a dead game sport. Bijou fer sixty-five dollars. How much am I bid fer the field ? "

The field sold for fifty, and the auctioneer glanced at Mr. Bobo, who shook his head and shuffled away. Ten consecutive times he had bought pools. Ten consecutive times Mr. Rinaldo Roberts had paid, by proxy, sixty-five dollars for the privilege of naming By-Jo as second choice to the son of Meteor.

" Fifteen hunderd," mumbled the old man to himself. " Five las' night an' ten to-day. It's a sure shot, that's what it is, a sure shot. I worked him out in fifty-one seconds. Oh, Lord, what a clip ! in fifty-one," he repeated with his abominable chuckle, " an' Nal's filly has never done better than fifty-two. Nal didn't buy no pools. He knows better."

By a queer coincidence Mr. Roberts was also indulging in pleasing introspection.

" The old cuss," he mused, " is blooded. I'll allow he's blooded, but he thinks this a dead cert. Lemme see, fifty-one an' two make fifty-three. No clip at all. Gosh ! what a game, what a game ! Why, there's Mandy a-sittin' up with Mis' Root. I'll jest sashay acrost the track an' give 'em my regards."

Mandy was atop a red-wheeled spring wagon. A sailor hat—price, trimmed, forty-five cents—overshadowed her smiling face, and a new dress cleverly fashioned out of white cheese cloth, embellished her person. She had been watching her lover closely for upwards of an hour, but expressed superlative surprise at seeing him.

" Why, Nal," she said demurely " this ain't you ? You are acquainted with Mis' Root, I guess ? "

Nal removed his cap with a flourish, and Mrs. Root, a large, lymphatic, prolific female, entreated him to ascend the wagon and sit down.

" You have a horse runnin', Mister Roberts ? "

" Yes, marm, By-Jo."

" By what ? "

" By Diamond," replied Rinaldo, glibly, " outer Cap Wilson's old Sally. She was by——"

" Mis' Root didn't catch the name right," interrupted Mandy. " It's By-Jo, Mis' Root—that's French."

" Mercy me, ain't that nice—quite toney. I hope he'll win if Mister Bobo's horse don't."

" Nal," whispered Mandy, " you've not been betting against Comet, have you ? "

" That's what I have, Mandy. I've got my hull stack o' chips on this yere half-mile dash."

" But, Nal, Comet will win sure. Grandfather's crazy about the colt. He says he can't lose noway."

" That's all right," said Nal. " I'm glad he feels so well about it. Set his heart on winnin', eh ? That's good. Say, I guess I'll sit right here and see the race. It's handy to the judges' stand, and the horses are all on the track."

In fact, for some time the runners had been walking backwards and forwards, and were now grouped together near the starter. Mr. Bobo was in the timer's box, chuckling satanically. Fifteen hundred dollars, according to his own computation, were already added to a plethoric bank account.

" Yer feelin' well, Mister Bobo," said a bystander.

" I'm feelin' mighty well," he replied, " never was feelin' better, never. There's a heap o' fools in this yere world, but I ain't responsible for their mistakes—not much," and he cackled loudly.

After the usual annoying delay the horses were dismissed with an excellent start. Bijou jumped immediately to the front, and Nal threw his hat high into the air.

" Ain't she a cyclone ? " he shouted, standing upon the wagon seat and waving his stop-watch. " Look at her, I say, look at her ! "

The people in his vicinity stared, smiled, and finally cheered. Most of them knew Nal and liked him well.

" Yer mare is winnin'," yelled a granger.

" You bet she is," retorted Mr. Roberts. " See her ! Ain't she takin' the kinks out of her speed ? Ain't that a clip ? Sit still, ye fool," he cried lustily, apostrophising the boy who was riding ; "if ye git a move on ye I'll kill ye. Oh, my lord ! if she ain't a-goin' to distance them ! Yes, sir, she's a shuttin' 'em out. Damn it—I ain't a swearin', Mis' Root—damn it, I say, *she's a shuttin' 'em out !* She's done it ! ! The race is won ! ! ! "

He jumped from the wagon and plunged into the crowd, which respectfully made way for him.

. . . .

" I've somethin' to tell ye, Mandy," said Mr. Roberts, some ten months later. I feel kind o' mean, too. But I done it for you ; for love o' you, Mandy."

" Yes, Nal ; what is it ? "

They had been married a fortnight.

" Ye remember when the old man had the fit in the timer's box ? Well, that knocked me galley-west. I felt a reg'ler murderer. But when he'd braced up, an began makin' himself hateful over our weddin', I felt glad that I'd done what I done."

" And what had you done, Nal, dear ? "

" Hold on, Mandy, I'm tellin' this. Ye see, he promised to sell ye to me for two thousand dollars cash. But when I tendered him the coin, he went back on me. He was the meanest, the ornariest——"

" Hush, Nal, he's dead now."

" You bet he is, or we wouldn't be sittin' here."

They were comfortably installed upon the porch of the old adobe. A smell of paint tainted the air, and some shavings and odds and ends of lumber betrayed a recent visit from the carpenter. The house, in short, had been placed in thorough repair. A young woman with fifty thousand dollars in her own right can afford to spend a little money upon her home.

" He wouldn't take the coin," continued Nal, " he said I'd robbed him of it, an' so I had."

" Oh, Nal ! "

" It was this way, Mandy. Ye remember the trial, an' how you give the snap away. Well I studied over it, an' finally I concluded to jest dig up the half-mile post, an' put it one hundred feet nearer home. I took considerable chances but not a soul suspicioned the change. The next night I put it back again. The old man timed the colt an' so did I. *Fifty-one seconds !* I knew my filly could do the whole half-mile in that. Comet's second dam was a bronco, an' that will tell ! But I wanted to make your grandfather bet his wad. He never could resist a sure-shot bet, never. That's all."

Amanda looked deep into his laughing eyes.

" He was willing to sell me, his own flesh and blood," she murmured dreamily. " I think, Nal, you served him just about right, but I wish, don't get mad, Nal, I wish that—er—someone else had pulled up the post ! "

XVII

MINTIE

Mintie stood upon the porch of the old adobe, shading her brown eyes from the sun, now declining out of stainless skies into the brush-hills to the west of the ranch. The hand shading the eyes trembled; the red lips were pressed together; faint lines upon the brow and about the mouth indicated anxiety, and possibly fear. A trapper would have recognised in the expression of the face a watchful intensity or apprehension common to all animals who have reason to know themselves to be the prey of others.

Suddenly a shot rang out, repeating itself in echoes from the cañon behind the house. Mintie turned pale, and then laughed derisively.

"Gee!" she exclaimed. "How easy scairt I am!"

She sank, gaspingly, upon a chair, and began to fan herself with the skirt of her gown. Then, as if angry on account of a weakness, physical rather than mental, she stood up and smiled defiantly, showing her small white teeth. She was still trembling; and remarking this, she stamped upon the floor of the porch, and became rigid. Her face charmed because of its irregularity. Her skin was a clear brown, matching the eyes and hair. She had the grace and vigour of an unbroken filly at large upon the range. And, indeed, she had been born in the wilderness, and left it but seldom. Her father's ranch lay forty miles from San Lorenzo, high up in the foothills—a sterile tract of scrub-oak and cedar, of manzanita and chaparral, with here and there good grazing ground, and lower down, where the creek ran, a hundred acres of arable land. Behind the house bubbled a big spring which irrigated the orchard and garden.

Teamsters, hauling grain from the Carisa Plains to the San Lorenzo landing, a distance of nearly a hundred miles, would beguile themselves thinking of the apples which old man Ransom would be sure to offer, and the first big drink from the cold spring.

Mintie was about to enter the house, when she saw down the road a tiny reek of white dust.

" Gee ! " she exclaimed for the second time. " Who's this ? "

Being summer, the hauling had not yet begun. Mintie, who had the vision of a turkey-buzzard, stared at the reek of dust.

"Smoky Jack, I reckon," she said disdainfully.

Nevertheless, she went into the house, and when she reappeared a minute later her hair displayed a slightly more ordered disorder, and she had donned a clean apron.

She expressed surprise rather than pleasure when a young man rode up, shifted in his saddle, and said :—

" How air you folks makin' it ? "

" Pretty fair. Goin' to town ? "

" I thought, mebbe, of goin' to town nex' week. I come over jest to pass the time o' day with the old man."

"Rode ten miles to pass the time o' day with—Pap ? "

" Yas."

" Curiously fond men air of each other ! "

" That's so," said Smoky admiringly. " An' livin' alone puts notions o' love and tenderness into my head that never comed thar when Maw was alive an' kickin'. I tell yer, its awful lonesome on my place."

He sat up in his saddle, a handsome young fellow, the vaquero rather than the cowboy, a distinction well understood in California. John Short had been nicknamed Smoky Jack because of his indefatigable efforts to clear his own brush-hills by fire. Across his saddle was a long-barrelled, old-fashioned rifle. Mintie glanced at it.

"Was that you who fired jest now?"

"Nit," said Smoky. "I heard a shot," he added. "'Twas the old man. I'd know the crack of his Sharp anywheres. 'Tis the dead spit o' mine. There'll be buck's liver for supper sure."

"Why are you carryin' a gun?"

"I thought I might run acrost a deer."

"No other reason?"

Beneath her steady glance his blue eyes fell. He replied with restraint—

"I wouldn't trust some o' these squatters any further than I could sling a bull by the tail. Your Pap had any more trouble with 'em?"

Mintie answered savagely:—

"They're a-huntin' trouble. Likely as not they'll find it, too."

Smoky grinned. Being the son of an old settler, he held squatters in detestation. Of late years they had invaded the foothills. Pap Ransom was openly at feud with them. They stole his cattle, cut his fences, and one of them, Jake Farge, had dared to take up a claim inside the old man's back-pasture.

Smoky stared at Mintie. Then he said abruptly—

"You look kinder peaky-faced. Anything wrong?"

"Nothing," replied Mintie.

"You ain't a-worryin' about your Pap, air ye? I reckon he kin take keer of himself."

" I reckon he kin ; so kin his daughter."

" Shall I put my plug into the barn ? "

" We're mighty short of hay," said Mintie inhospitably.

Smoky Jack stared at her and laughed. Then he slipped from the saddle, pulled the reins over the horse's head, and threw the ends on the ground. With a deprecating smile he said softly—

" Air you very extry busy, Mints ? "

" Not very extry. Why ? "

" I've a notion to read ye something. It come to me las' Sunday week in the middle of the night. An' now it's slicked up to the Queen's taste."

" Poetry ? "

" I dunno as it's that—after the remarks you passed about that leetle piece I sent to the *Tribune*."

" You sent it ? Of all the nerve—— ! Did they print it ? "

Smoky Jack shook his head.

" Never expected they would," he admitted mournfully. " I won't deny that it was kind o'——"

" Slushy ? " hazarded Mintie.

" Wal—yes. You'd made all sorts of a dodgasted fool outer me."

" Yer father and mother done that."

" I've said as much to Maw, many's the time. ' Maw,' I'd say, ' I ain't a masterpiece—and I know it.' But las' Sunday night I was *inspired*."

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. Mintie frowned. With a shy glance and heightened colour the man who had been inspired whispered softly—

" It's entitled, ' To My Own Brown Bird.' "

" And who's your brown bird ? " demanded Mintie sharply.

" As if you didn't know."

" Meanin' me ? "

"Couldn't naturally be nobody else."

"I'm not yours; and as for bein' brown, why, my skin is white as milk."

"I'll bet my life it is."

"As for bein' a bird, that ain't no compliment. Birds is first cousins to snakes. Never knew that, did ye?"

"Never—s'elp me! Is that really so?"

Covered with mortification, he put the paper back into his pocket.

"Read it," commanded the young lady. "Let's get it over an' done with. Then, mebbe, I'll help ye to rechristen the durned thing."

Emboldened by this gracious speech, Smoky began in a nasal, drawling voice—

"I've wandered far—I've wandered wide——"

"Ananias!" said Mintie. "You was born in these yere foothills, and raised in 'em; and you've never known enough to git out of 'em."

"Git out of 'em?"

"Git out of 'em," she repeated scornfully. "D'ye think if I was a man I'd stop in such a God-forsaken place as yours, with nothing but rattlesnakes and coyotes to keep me company? Go on!"

"I've wandered far—I've wandered wide—
  I've dwelt in many a stately tower;
And now I turn me back to ride
  To my own brown bird in her humble bower."

"That'll do," said Mintie. "You ain't improved much. Bill Shakespeare can rest easy in his tomb. I've got my chores to do. 'Bout time you was doin' yours."

Smoky Jack, refusing to budge, said jocosely, "Things air fixed up to home. 'Twouldn't worry me any if I never got back till to-morrer."

Mintie frowned and went into the house. Smoky led his horse to the barn with perplexity and distress writ large upon his face.

"Notice to quit," he muttered. Then he grinned pleasantly. "Reckon a perfect gen'leman 'd take the hint and clear out. But I ain't a perfect gen'leman. What in thunder ails the girl?"

. . . .

It was nearly seven when Pap Ransom reached his corral. Smoky had milked the cow and fed the pigs. In the kitchen Mintie was frying some potatoes and stirring the big pot full of beans and bacon. From time to time Smoky had caught a glimpse of her white apron as she whisked in and out of the kitchen. Although a singularly modest youth, he conceived the idea that Mintie was interested in his doings, whereas we must admit that she was more concerned about her father. However, when she saw Pap ascend the hill, carrying his rifle over his shoulder, her face resumed its ordinary expression, and from that minute she gave to the simple preparations for supper undivided attention.

"Whar's the liver?" said Smoky, as the old man nodded to him.

"Liver?"

"Heard a shot, jest one, and made certain a good buck was on his back."

"I never fired no shot," said Ransom slowly.

"Wal, I'm hanged! Is there another Sharp besides mine in these yere hills?"

"I dessay. I heard one shot myself, 'bout two hours ago."

"Guess it was one o' them derned squatters."

"Curse 'em!" said Ransom. He spat upon the ground and walked into the abode. Smoky nodded reflectively.

Supper was not a particularly cheery meal. Mintie, usually a nimble talker, held her tongue. Ransom aired his pet grievance—the advent of Easterners, who presumed to take up land which was supposed to belong to, or at least go with, the old Spanish grants. Smoky and Mintie knew well enough that the land was Uncle Sam's ; but they knew also that Ransom had run his cattle over it during five-and-twenty years. If that didn't constitute a better title than a United States patent, there was no justice anywhere. Smoky, filled with beans and bacon, exclaimed vehemently—

" Shoot 'em on sight, that's what I say."

Mintie stared at his bright eyes and flushed cheeks.

" Do you allus mean jest what you say ? " she inquired sarcastically.

" Wal," replied Smoky, more cautiously, " they ain't been monkeyin' with me ; but if they did——"

" If they did——? " drawled Mintie, with her elbows on the table and her face between her hands.

" If they cut my fence as they've cut yours, and, after doo warnings, kep' on trespassin' and makin' trouble, why then, by Gosh ! I'd shoot. Might give 'other feller a show, but there's trouble as only kin be settled with shootin' irons."

" That's so " said Mintie savagely.

After supper Mintie retired to the kitchen to wash up. Ransom put a jar of tobacco on the table, two glasses, and some whisky.

" Any call for ye to ride home to-night ? "

" None," said Smoky.

" Reckon ye'd better camp here, then."

Smoky nodded and muttered—

" Don't keer if I do," a polite form of acceptance in the Californian foothills.

Presently Ransom went out. Smoky was left alone. He filled his corn-cob pipe, stretched out his legs, and smiled, thinking of his own brown bird. Suddenly a glint came into his bright blue eyes. In the corner of the room, against the wall, leaned the two Sharp rifles. Smoky glanced about him, rose, walked to the corner, bent down, and smelt the muzzle of Ransom's rifle. Then he slipped his forefinger into the barrel and smelt that.

"Sufferin' Moses!" he exclaimed.

His mouth was slightly twisted, as he picked up the rifle and opened the breech. He drew out a used cartridge, which he examined with another exclamation.

"Holy Mackinaw!"

He put the cartridge into his pocket and glanced round for the second time. He could hear Mintie washing-up in the kitchen. Ransom was feeding his horses. Smoky took a cleaning-rod, ran it through the rifle, and examined the bit of cloth, which was wet and greasy. Then he replaced the rifle and went back to the table, where Ransom found him when he returned a few minutes later. The two men smoked in silence. Presently Ransom said abruptly:—

"Dead struck on Mints, ain't ye?"

"I am," said Smoky laconically.

"Told her so—hay?"

"'Bout a million times."

"What does she say?"

Smoky blew some rings of smoke before he answered.

"She says—'Shucks!'"

"That don't sound encouragin'."

"It ain't. Fact is, she thinks me a clam."

"A clam?"

"That's right. She'd think a heap more o' me if I was to pull out o' these yere hills and try to strike it somewheres else."

"Wal, squatters have made this no kind o' country for a white man. Ye're white, John."

"I aim ter be."

"You air, sonnie. Say, if anything happened to me, would ye watch out for Mints?"

"I wonder!"

"S'pose, fer the sake of argyment, that one o' these sons o' guns did for me—hay ?"

"'Tain't likely," said Smoky scornfully. "I'd bet my boots on you every time."

"They may do fer me," said Ransom slowly, "and, if so——"

"I'll watch out for Mints," said Smoky very fervently.

. . . .

Presently Mintie joined them and, sitting down, began to darn some stockings. Apparently she was engrossed with her work, but Smoky stared at her, noticing that her fingers trembled. Ransom smoked and said nothing. Smoky talked, trying to challenge Mintie's interest and attention, but sensible of failure. Moreover, he had nothing to talk about except bad times and bad luck. Father and daughter listened grimly, well aware that their friend and neighbour was fighting against lack of water, a sterile soil, and a "plastered" ranch.

"Why don't you quit ?" Ransom asked testily.

"I ain't a quitter."

"He don't know enough to let go," said Mintie.

"I could earn good money with my uncle in Los Angeles County. He wants me."

Mintie tossed her head.

"If he wants you, the sooner you skin outer this the better."

"Uncle's well fixed," said Smoky, "and an old bach. He wants a live young man to take aholt with his ranch, and a live young woman to run the shebang. If I was married——!"

"Pity you ain't," said Mintie, without looking up.

Ransom, who had conducted his courting upon Western principles, rose up slowly and disappeared. Left alone with his beloved, the young man blushed and held his tongue.

"You think a heap o' the old man ?" he hazarded, after an interminable pause.

" I do. He's a man, is Pap."

" Meanin' ? "

" Anything you please."

" You mean that I ain't a man ? "

Mintie laughed softly ; and at that moment the old dog, lying by the hearth, got up and growled. Rebuked by Mintie, he continued growling, while the hair upon his aged back began to bristle with rage.

" Hark ! " exclaimed Mintie.

They could hear voices outside. The dog barked furiously as somebody hammered hard upon the door.

" Who can it be ? " said Mintie nervously.

Smoky Jack opened the door ; four or five men came in. At the door opposite appeared Ransom.

" What is it ? " he asked harshly. " What brings you here at this time o' night ? "

The leader of the party, a tall 'Piker,' answered as curtly—

" Business."

" What business ? "

" I don't talk business afore wimmenfolks."

Mintie's face was white enough now, and her lips were quivering.

" Come you here, child," said her father.

He looked at her steadily.

" You go to bed an' stay there. Not a word ! An' don't worry."

Mintie hesitated, opened her mouth and closed it. Then she walked quietly out of the room.

" What brings you here ? " repeated Ransom.

" Murder."

" Murder ? Whose murder ? "

" This afternoon," replied the 'Piker,' " Jake Farge was shot dead on your land, not a quarter of a mile from this yere house. His widder found him and come to me."

" Wal ? "

" She says the shot that killed him must ha' bin fired 'bout six. She heard it, an' happened to look at the clock."

" Wal ? "

" She swears that you fired it."

Smoky burst in impetuously—

" At six I kin swear that Pap was a-talkin' to me in his own corral."

The squatters glanced at each other. The 'Piker' laughed derisively.

" In love with his darter, ain't ye ? "

" I am—and proud of it ! "

" Them your guns ? " The spokesman addressed Ransom, indicating the two rifles.

" One of 'em is mine ; t'other belongs to Smoky."

The 'Piker' crossed the room, examined the rifles, opened each, and peered down the barrels. He glanced at the other squatters, and said laconically—

" Quite clean—as might be expected."

Ransom betrayed his surprise very slightly. He had just remembered that he had left an empty cartridge in his rifle, and that it was not clean. The 'Piker' turned to him again.

" You claim that you know nothing o' this job ? "

" Not a thing."

" And you ? "

The big 'Piker' stared superciliously at Smoky.

" Same here," said Smoky.

The visitors glanced at each other, slightly nonplussed. The big 'Piker' swore in his beard.

" We'll arrest the hull outfit," he said decidedly, " and carry 'em in to San Lorenzy."

" You ain't the sheriff nor his deputy," said Ransom. " What d'ye mean," he continued savagely, " by coming here with this ridic'lous song and dance ? There's the door. Git ! "

" You threatened to shoot Farge," said the 'Piker.' " An' it's my solid belief you done it —in cold blood, too. We're five here, all heeled, and there's more outside. If you're innocent the sheriff'll let you off to-morrer; but, innocent or guilty, by Gosh, you're comin' with us to-night. Hold up yer hands! Quick!"

Ransom and Smoky held up their hands.

"Search 'em," commanded the 'Piker.'

This was done effectively. A Derringer doesn't take up much room in a man's pocket, but it has been known to turn the tables upon larger weapons. Ransom and Smoky, however, were unarmed; but the squatter who ran his hand over Smoky's pockets encountered a small cylinder, which he held up to the public gaze.

It was an empty cartridge.

To understand fully what this meant one must possess a certain knowledge of Western ways and sentiment. Pistols and rifles belonging to the pioneers, for example, often exhibit notches, each of which bears silent witness to the shedding of blood. The writer knew intimately a very mild, kindly old man who had a strop fashioned out of several thicknesses of Apache skins. The Apaches had inflicted unmentionable torments upon him and his, and the strop was his dearest possession. The men and women of the wilderness are primal in their loves and hates.

The big 'Piker' examined the long brass cylinder, small of bore and old-fashioned in shape. He slipped it into the Sharp rifle, and laughed grimly as he said—

"A relic!"

Ransom's face was impassive; Smoky Jack exhibited a derisive defiance. Inwardly he was cursing himself for a fool in having kept the cartridge. He had intended to throw it away as soon as he found himself outside. But from the first he had wanted Mintie's father to know *that he knew!* Primal again. Pap would not forget to clean his rifle at the first opportunity; and then, without a word on either side, he would realise that the man who wanted his daughter was a true friend.

We may add that the breaking of the sixth commandment in no wise affected Smoky. Jake Farge had been warned that he would be shot on sight if he made "trouble." Everybody in San Lorenzo County was well aware that it was no kind of use "foolin'" with Pap Ransom. Jake—in a word—deserved what he had got. Smoky would have drawn as true a bead upon a squatter disputing title to his land. We don't defend Mr. Short's ethics, we simply state them.

The 'Piker' said quietly—

"Anything to say, young feller?"

Smoky Jack made a gallant attempt to bluff a man who had played his first game of poker before Smoky was born.

"Yer dead right. It *is* a relic of a big buck I killed with that ther gun las' week. Flopped into a mare's nest, you hev!"

"That shell was fired to-day," said the 'Piker,' authoritatively. "The powder ain't dry in it. Boys,"—he glanced round at the circle of grim faces—"let's take the San Lorenzy road."

. . . .

The squatters, reinforced by half a dozen men who had not entered the adobe, escorted their prisoners down the hill till they came to a large live oak, a conspicuous feature of the meadow beyond the creek. The moon shone at the full as she rose majestically above the pines which fringed the eastern horizon. In the air was a smell of tar-weed, deliciously aromatic; and the only sounds audible were the whispering of the tremulous leaves of the cottonwoods and the tinkle of the creek on its way to the Pacific.

Smoky inhaled the fragrance of the tar-weed, and turned his blue eyes to the left, where, in the far distance, a tall pine indicated the north-west corner of his ranch. Neither he nor Ransom expected to reach San Lorenzo that night. They were setting out on a much longer journey.

Under the live oak Judge Lynch opened his court. No time was wasted. The squatters were impressed with the necessity of doing what had to be done quickly. The big 'Piker' spoke first.

"Boys, ain't it true that in this yere county there ain't bin a single man executed by the law fer murder in the first degree?"

"That's right. Not a one!"

"And if a man has a bit o' dough behind him, isn't it a fact that he don't linger overly long in San Quentin?"

"Dead sure snap."

"Boys, this is our affair. We're pore; we've neither money nor time to waste in law courts, but we've got to show some o' these fellers as is holding land as don't belong to 'em that we mean business first, last, and all the time."

There was a hoarse murmur of assent.

"The cold facts are these," continued the speaker. "We all know that Ransom and Jake Farge hev had trouble over the claim that Farge staked out inside o' Ransom's fence; an' we know that Ransom has no more right to the land he fenced than the coyotes that run on it. For twenty years he's enjoyed the use of what isn't his'n, an' I say he'd oughter be thankful. Anyways, we come down to the events of yesterday and to-day. Yesterday he tole Jake that he'd shoot him on sight if he, Jake, come on to the land which Uncle Sam says is his. Do you deny that?"

"That's 'bout what I tole him," drawled Ransom.

"To-day Jake was shot dead like a dog by somebody who was a-waitin' for him, hidden in the brush. The widder, pore soul, suspicioning trouble, follered Jake, and found him with a bullet plumb through his heart. She heard the shot, and she swore that it come from Ransom's side o' the fence. And she knows and we know that there isn't a man 'twixt Maine and Californy with a grudge agen Jake, always exceptin' this yere Ransom."

"That's so," growled the Court.

"Boys, Jake was murdered with a bullet of small bore—not with a bullet outer a Winchester, sech as most of us carry. Whar did that ther bullet come from, boys?"

"Outer a Sharp rifle."

"Jest so. Who fired it? Mebbe we'll never know that. But we know this. 'Twas fired by one o' these yere men. One was and is accessory to t'other. The boy admits he's sweet on Ransom's gal; an' mebbe he did this dirt to win her. And he swears that Pap was in his corral at six. That's a lie or it ain't, as may be. If he was in the corral, t'other wasn't. Boys—I won't detain ye any longer. Those in favour of hangin' Thomas Ransom an' John Short here and now hold up their hands!"

The men present held up their hands. One or two of the more bloodthirsty held up both hands.

"That'll do. Those in favour of takin' the prisoners to San Lorenzy hold up their hands. Nary a hand! Prisoners ye've bin tried by yer feller-men, and found guilty o' murder in the first degree. Have ye anything to say?"

Smoky answered huskily: "Nothin', 'cept that I'm not guilty."

"An' you, Mr. Ransom?" said the 'Piker,' with odd politeness.

"I've a lot ter say," drawled the old man. "Seemin'ly murder has been done, but Smoky here never done it; nor did I. I fired at a buck an' missed it. There ain't overly much o' the fool in me, but there's enough to make me hate ownin' up to a clean miss. When I got to the corral this evening, Smoky had bin there an hour or so at least. He arst me if I'd killed a buck and said he'd heard a shot. Wal, I lied, but I saw that he suspicioned me. Afterwards, I reckon he'd a look at the old gun, and found the shell in it. He must ha' got it into his fool head that he was God's appointed instrument to save *me*. He's as innercent as Mary's little lamb, and so am I."

The squatters gazed at each other in stupefaction. Not a man present but could lie fearlessly on occasion, but not with such consummate art as this.

"Anything more ter say?" inquired the 'Piker.'

"Wal, there's this: I tole Jake Farge that I'd shoot him on sight, and I'm mighty glad that someone else has saved me the trouble. You mean to do me up; I see that plain. I hated yer comin' into a country that won't support a crowd, and I've made things hot for more'n one of ye. But I wasn't thinkin' o' land when I warned Jake Farge not to set foot on my ranch."

"What was you thinkin' of?"

"Of my Mintie. That feller—a married man—has bin after her—and some of you know it. She kin take keer of herself can my Mints, but some things is a man's business. I meant to shoot him, but I didn't. I'm glad the low-down cuss is dead, but the bullet that stopped his crawlin' to my gal never come outer my rifle. Now string me up, and be derned to ye, but let this young feller go back to look after my daughter. That's all."

He faced them with a derisive smile upon his weather-beaten face.

Obviously, the Court was impressed, but the fact remained that Jake Farge was dead, and that someone must have killed him.

" What d'ye say, boys ? "

" I say he's lyin'," observed a squatter, whom Thomas Ransom had discovered ear-marking an unbranded calf.

" Smoky knows that Pap done it," remarked another.

This bolt went home. Smoky's face during the preceding five minutes had been worth studying. He was quite sure that the old man was lying, and upon his ingenuous countenance such knowledge, illuminated by admiration and amazement, was duly inscribed.

" Pap's yarn is too thin," said a gaunt Missourian.

" It's thin as you air," said Ransom contemptuously. " Do you boys think that I'd spring so thin a tale on ye, if it wasn't true ? "

At this they wriggled uneasily. The ' Piker,' with some experience of fickle crowds, said peremptorily—

" The old man done it, and the young 'un knows he done it. They're jest two of a kind. Those in favour of hangin' 'em both hold up their hands. One hand apiece will do."

Slowly, inexorably, the hands went up.

The judge pronounced sentence—

" Ye've five minutes. Say yer prayers, if ye feel like it."

The simple preparations were made swiftly. Two raw-hide lariats were properly adjusted. The prisoners looked on with the stoical indifference of Red Indians. It might have been said of the pair that neither had known how to live, but each knew how to die.

" Ready ? " said the ' Piker.'

" Hold on ! " replied a high-pitched voice.

The crowd turned to behold Mintie. She had crawled up silently and stealthily. But now she stood upright, her small head thrown back, her eyes glittering in the moonlight.

"Got a rope fer me?" she asked. "I've heard everything."

Nobody answered. The girl laughed; then she said slowly—

"I shot Jake Farge—with this."

She threw a small revolver at the 'Piker,' who picked it up. "I killed him at five this afternoon. I knew that if I didn't do it Pap would, and that you'd hang him. Jake came after me agen an' agen, an' each time I warned him. To-day he came fer the last time. He was half-crazy, and I had to kill the beast to save myself. I did it, and"—she looked steadfastly at Smoky Jack—"I ain't ashamed of it, neither. There's only one man in all the world can make love to me. I never knowed that I keered for him till to-night."

She pointed at Smoky, who remarked deprecatingly—

"I allus allowed you was a daughter o' the Golden West."

"If you ain't goin' to hang me," said Mintie, "don't you think you'd better skip?"

She laughed scornfully, and the men, without a word, skipped. Smoky, his hands loosed, seized Mintie in his arms, as the moon slipped discreetly behind a cloud.

XVIII

ONE WHO DIED

He was a remittance man, who received each month from his father, a Dorset parson, a letter and a cheque. The letter was not a source of pleasure to the son, and does not concern us; the cheque made five pounds payable to the order of Richard Beaumont Carteret, known to many men in San Lorenzo county, and some women, as Dick. Time was when Mr. Carteret cut what is called a wide swath, when indeed he was kowtowed to as Lord Carteret, who drove tandem, shot pigeons, and played all the games, including poker and faro. But the ten thousand pounds he inherited from his mother lasted only five years, and when the last penny was spent Dick wrote to his father and demanded an allowance. He knew that the parson was living in straitened circumstances, with two daughters to provide for, and he knew also that his mother's fortune should in equity have been divided among the family; but, as he pointed out to his dear old governor, a Carteret mustn't be allowed to starve; so the parson, who loved the handsome lad, put down his hack and sent the prodigal a remittance. He had better have sent him a hempen rope, for necessity might have made a man out of Master Dick; the remittance turned him into a moral idiot.

A Carteret, as you know, cannot do himself justice upon five pounds a month, so Dick was constrained to play the part of Mentor to sundry youthful compatriots, teaching them a short cut to ruin, and sharing the while their purses and affections. But, very unhappily for Dick, the supply of fools suddenly failed, and, lo! Dick's occupation was gone. Finally, in despair, he allied himself to another remittance man, an ex-deacon of the Church of England, and the two drifted slowly out of decent society upon a full tide of Bourbon whisky.

Tidings must have come to the parson of his son's unhappy condition, or possibly he decided that the Misses Carteret were entitled to the remittance. It is certain that one dreadful day Dick's letter contained nothing but a sheet of notepaper.

"I can send you no more cheques" (wrote the parson), "not another penny will you receive from me. I pray to God that He may see fit to turn your heart, for He alone can do it. I have failed . . ."

Dick showed this letter to his last and only friend, the ex-deacon, the Rev. Tudor Crisp, known to many publicans and sinners as the 'Bishop.' The two digested the parson's words in a small cabin situated upon a pitiful patch of ill-cultivated land; land irreclaimably mortgaged to the hilt, which the 'Bishop' spoke of as "my place." Dick (he had a sense of humour) always called the cabin the rectory. It contained one unplastered, unpapered room, carpetless and curtainless; a bleak and desolate shelter that even a sheep-herder would be loth to describe as home. In the corners were two truckle beds, a stove, and a large demijohn containing some cheap and fiery whisky; in the centre of the floor was a deal table; on the rough redwood walls were shelves displaying many dilapidated pairs of boots and shoes, also some fly-specked sporting prints, and, upon a row of nails, a collection of shabby discoloured garments, ancient "hartogs," manifesting even in decay a certain jaunty, dissolute air, at once ludicrous and pathetic. Outside, in front, the 'Bishop' had laid out a garden wherein nothing might be found save weeds and empty beer bottles, dead men denied decent interment. Behind the cabin was the dust-heap, an interesting and historical mound, an epitome, indeed, of the 'Bishop's' gastronomical past, that emphasised his descent from Olympus to Hades; for on the top was a plebeian deposit of tomato and sardine cans, whereas below, if you stirred the heap, might be found a nobler stratum of terrines, once savoury with *foie gras* and Strasbourg *pâté*, of jars still fragrant of fruits embedded in liqueur, of bottles that had contained the soups that a divine loves —oxtail, turtle, mulligatawny, and the like. Upon rectory, glebe, and garden was legibly inscribed the grim word—ICHABOD.

"He means what he says," growled Dick. "So far as he's concerned I'm dead."

"You ought to be," said the 'Bishop,' "but you aren't; what are you going to do?"

This question burned its insidious way to Dick's very vitals. What could he do? Whom could he do? After a significant pause he caught the 'Bishop's' eye, and, holding his pipe as it might be a pistol, put it to his head, and clicked his tongue.

"Don't," said the 'Bishop' feebly.

The two smoked on in silence. The Rev. Tudor Crisp reflected mournfully that one day a maiden aunt might withdraw the pittance that kept his large body and small soul together. This unhappy thought sent him to the demijohn, whence he extracted two stiff drinks.

"No," said Dick, pushing aside the glass. "I want to think, to think. Curse it, there must be a way out of the wood. If I'd capital we could start a saloon. We know the ropes, and could make a living at it, more, too, but now we can't even get one drink on credit. Why don't you say something, you stupid fool ? "

He spoke savagely. The past reeled before his eyes, all the cheery happy days of youth. He could see himself at school, in the playing fields, at college, on the river, in London, at the clubs. Other figures were in the picture, but he held the centre of the stage. God in heaven, what a fool he had been !

The minutes glided by, and the 'Bishop' refilled his glass, glancing from time to time at Dick. He was somewhat in awe of Carteret, but the whisky warmed him into speech.

" Look here," he said with a spectral grin, " what's enough for one is enough for two. We'll get along, old man, on my money, till the times mend."

Dick rose, tall and stalwart ; and then he smiled, not unkindly, at the squat, ungainly 'Bishop.'

" You're a good chap," he said quietly. " Shake hands, and—good-bye."

" Why, where are you going ? "

" Ah ! Who knows ? If the fairy tales are true, we may meet again later."

Crisp stared at the speaker in horror. He had reason to know that Dick was reckless, but this dare-devil despair apalled him. Yet he had wit enough to attempt no remonstrance, so he gulped down his whisky and waited.

" It's no use craning at a blind fence," continued Dick. " Sooner or later we all come to the jumping-off place. I've come to it to-night. You can give me a decent funeral—the governor will stump up for that—and there will be pickings for you. You can read the service, 'Bishop.' Gad ! I'd like to see you in a surplice."

" Please, don't," pleaded the Rev. Tudor.

" He'll be good for a hundred sovs.," continued Dick. " You can do the thing handsomely for half that."

" For God's sake, shut up."

" Pooh! why shouldn't you have your fee? That hundred would start us nicely in the saloon business, and——"

He was walking up and down the dusty, dirty floor. Now he stopped, and his eyes brightened; but Crisp noted that his hands trembled.

" Give me that whisky," he muttered. " I want it now."

The 'Bishop' handed him his glass. Dick drained it, and laughed.

" Don't," said the 'Bishop' for the third time. Dick laughed again, and slapped him on the shoulder. Then the smile froze on his lips, and he spoke grimly.

" What does the apostle say—hey? We must die to live. A straight tip! Well—! I shall obey the apostolic injunction gladly. I'm going to die to-night. Don't jump like that, you old ass; let me finish. I'm going to die to-night, but you and I are going into the saloon business all the same. Yes, my boy, and we'll tend bar ourselves, and keep our eyes on the till, and have our own bottle of the best, and be perfect gentlemen. Come on, let's drink to my resurrection. Here's to the man who was, and is, and is to be."

" You're a wonder," replied the 'Bishop' fervently. " I understand. You mean to be your own undertaker."

" I do, my lord. Now give me the baccy, some ink and paper, and an hour's peace."

But the hour passed and found Dick still composing. The 'Bishop' watched his friend with spaniel-like patience. At last the scribe flung down his pen, and read aloud, as follows—

"THE RECTORY, SAN LORENZO,
"*September* 1.

"TO THE REV. GEORGE CARTERET.

"DEAR SIR,—I beg to advise you, with sincere regret on my part, of the sudden demise of your son, Richard Beaumont Carteret, who died at my house just three days ago of heart failure, quite painlessly. You will find enclosed the doctor's certificate, the coroner's report, and the undertaker's bill ***paid and receipted***.

"I had a very honest friendship for your son, although I deplored a misspent youth. But I rejoice to say that poor Dick lived long enough to heartily repent him of his sins, which after all were sins against himself. He often talked of home and you, alluding feelingly to the sacrifices you had made on his behalf—sacrifices that he confessed were far greater than his deserts.

"I am a poor man, but I felt impelled to give your son the funeral of a gentleman. The bills I have paid, as you will observe, in full, including the purchase in perpetuity of a lot in the cemetery. Should you see fit to refund me these amounts, I shall not refuse the money; if, on the other hand, you repudiate the claim, I shall let the matter drop. I could not permit my friend to be buried as a pauper.

"It is possible that you may wish a stone placed at the head of the grave. A suitable cross of plain white marble would cost about two hundred dollars. If you care to entrust me with the sad commission, I will give it my earnest attention.

"I refer you to my aunt, Miss Janetta Crisp, of Montpelier Road, Brighton, and also to the Clergy List.

"Very truly yours,
"TUDOR CRISP (The Rev.)."

"There," exclaimed Mr. Carteret, "that will do the trick. The bills and other documents we'll forge at our leisure to-morrow."

"I don't quite like the use of my name," protested the Rev. Tudor Crisp.

Dick explained that his reverence would be entitled to half the plunder, and that discovery was almost impossible. Still, despite Dick's eloquence, the 'Bishop' submitted that such a cruel fraud was "tough" on the old gentleman.

"On the contrary," retorted the other. "He will assume that I died in the odour of sanctity, in the atmosphere of a rectory, in the arms of a parson. He'll worry no more, poor old chap, about my past or my future. This is the turning-point of our fortunes. Don't look so glum, man. Here—hit the demijohn again."

But the 'Bishop' declined this invitation, and betook himself to his blankets, muttering inarticulate nothings. Dick relighted his pipe, and refilled his glass. Then he walked to the mantelshelf and gazed long and critically at three framed photographs of his father and two sisters. These were almost the only property he possessed. It is significant from an ethical point of view that Dick kept these pictures where he could see them. The 'Bishop' had photos also, but they lay snug at the bottom of an old portmanteau. His reverence was sensible that he was not worthy to keep company with even the pictures of honourable and respectable persons. No such qualms affected Dick. He regarded these photos as credentials. His father had a charming face—one of those human documents whereon are inscribed honour, culture, benevolence, and the wisdom that is not of this world. The sisters, too, had comely features; and strangers introduced to the family group always felt more kindly disposed to the prodigal so far from such nice people. Dick had impetrated more than one loan, using these portraits as collateral security. Did his heart soften as he bade them farewell? Who can tell?

. . . .

Within six weeks the Rev. Tudor Crisp received a cheque from distant Dorset, and the proceeds were duly invested in a saloon in San Clemente, a town some twenty miles from San Lorenzo. Moreover, the business prospered from the start. The partners, Crisp and Cartwright (Dick deemed it wise to alter his name), kept no assistants, so there was no leakage from the till. They understood that this liquor traffic was a shameful trade, but they pronounced themselves unable to follow any other. Curiously enough the work proved a tonic to the 'Bishop.' He allowed himself so many drinks a day, and observed faithfully other rules to his physical and financial betterment. He started a reading-room in connection with the bar, for he had had experience in such matters when a curate at home; and the illustrated papers sent regularly by his maiden aunt were in great demand. Indeed, the mere reading about football matches and the like created an unquenchable thirst in cowboys and sheep-herders. Moreover the 'Bishop' enforced order and decorum, being a muscular Christian, and the boys learned to curb obscene tongues in his presence. Dick marvelled at the change in his partner, but he was shrewd enough to see that it brought grist to the gin-mill.

"Once a parson, always a parson," Dick would say; and the Rev. Tudor would blush and sigh. He never spoke of his clerical days, but once Dick caught him furtively examining a picture of himself in surplice and cassock. Each week a division of the profits was made. The 'Bishop's' share was deposited in the local bank, but where Dick's dollars went it would be indiscreet to tell. He had no stomach for economies, and observed no rules. When he apprehended the general drift of things he was content to let the 'Bishop' have his way and say in regard to the conduct of the business. His reverence bought the cigars and liquors. Dick could hardly be called a sleeping partner, for he took the night watch, but the 'Bishop' did most of the work, and kept the books. Before two years had passed a capital restaurant was added to the reading-room, where the best of steaks and chops might be had, hot and hot, at all hours and at a reasonable price. Dick never knew it, but the 'Bishop' wrote to Miss Janetta Crisp and begged her to send no more cheques. He told his kind auntie very modestly that he had a bank account of his own, and that he hoped one day to thank her in person for all she had done for him.

Towards the close of the third year the 'Bishop' told Dick that it would be well for them to leave their saloon, and to purchase a small hotel then offered for sale. Dick told his old friend to go ahead. His reverence supplied Dick's share of the purchase-money, and the saloon knew them no more. But the hotel, under the 'Bishop's' management, proved a tiny gold mine.

All this time, however, the memory of that dirty trick he had helped to play upon an honest gentleman, festered in his memory. He feared that Nemesis would overtake him, and time justified these fears; for in the spring of 1898 came a second letter to the Rev. Tudor Crisp, of The Rectory, San Lorenzo, a letter that the poor 'Bishop' read with quickening pulses, and then showed to Dick.

"My very dear Sir" (it began), "a curious change in my fortunes enables me to carry out a long-cherished plan. I purpose, D.V., to pay a pilgrimage to my poor son's grave, and shall start for California immediately. Perhaps you will be good enough to let me spend a couple of days at the rectory. It will be a mournful pleasure to me to meet one who was kind to my dear lad.

"I will write to you again from San Francisco.

"Very gratefully yours,
"GEORGE CARTERET."

If the hotel, uninsured, had suddenly burst into flames, the 'Bishop' would have manifested far less consternation. He raved incoherently for nearly ten minutes, while Dick sat silent and nervous beneath a storm of remorse.

"I'll meet your father in San Francisco," said the unhappy Crisp, "and make a clean breast of it."

"That spells ruin," said Dick coldly. "The governor is a dear old gentleman, but he has the Carteret temper. He would make this place too hot for you and too hot for me. I've a voice in this matter, and for once," he added, with unnecessary sarcasm, "I propose to be heard."

"What do you mean to do?"

"If necessary I'll resurrect myself. I'll play the hand alone. You've no more tact than a hippopotamus. And I'll meet the governor. Don't stare. Do you think he'll know me? Not much! I left Dorset a smooth-faced boy; to-day I'm bearded like the pard. My voice, my figure, the colour of my hair, my complexion are quite unrecognisable. It may be necessary to show the governor my grave, but I shan't bring him down here. Now, I must commit murder as well as suicide."

"What?"

"I must kill you, you duffer! Do you think my father would return to England without thanking the man who was kind to his dear lad? And you would give the whole snap away. Yes;

I'll call upon him as Cartwright, the administrator of the late Tudor Crisp's estate. If it were not for that confounded grave and marble cross, I could fix him in ten minutes. Don't frown. I tell you, 'Bishop,' you're not half the fellow you were."

"Perhaps not," replied his reverence humbly.

But when Dick was alone he muttered to himself: "Now what the deuce did the governor mean by a curious change in his fortunes?"

. . . .

The Rev. George Carteret was sitting at ease in his comfortable rooms at the Acropolis Hotel. The luxury of them was new to him, yet not unpleasing after many years of rigorous self-denial and poverty. It seemed strange, however, that in the evening of life riches should have come to him —riches from a distant kinsman who, living, had hardly noticed the obscure scholar and parson. Five thousand pounds a year was fabulous wealth to a man whose income heretofore had numbered as many hundreds. And—alas! his son was dead. Not that the parson loved his daughters the less because they were girls, but as the cadet of an ancient family he had a Tory squire's prejudice in favour of a Salique Law. With the thousands went a charming grange in the north country and many fat acres which should of right be transmitted to a male Carteret. If—futile thought—Dick had only been spared!

Thus reflecting, the bellboy brought him a card. The parson placed his glasses upon a fine aquiline nose.

"Ahem! Mr.—er—Cartwright. The name is not familiar to me, but I'll see the gentleman."

And so, after many years, father and son met as strangers. Dick fluently explained the nature of his errand. Mr. Carteret's letter had been given to him as the administrator of the late Mr.

Tudor Crisp's estate. He happened to be in San Francisco, and, seeing Mr. Carteret's name in the morning paper, had ventured to call.

"And you, sir," said the father softly, "did you know my son?"

Dick admitted that he had known himself—slightly.

"A friend, perhaps? You are an Englishman."

Dick pulled his beard.

"Ah!" sighed the father, "I understand. My poor lad was not one, I fear, whom anyone would hasten to call a friend. But if I'm not trespassing too much upon your time and kindness, tell me what you can of him. What good, I mean."

Dick kept on pulling his beard.

"Was there no good?" said the father, very sorrowfully. "His friend, Mr. Crisp, wrote kindly of him. He said Dick had no enemies but himself."

Dick was sensible that his task was proving harder than he had expected. He could not twist his tongue to lie about himself. Men are strangely inconsistent. Dick had prepared other lies, a sackful of them; and he knew that a few extra ones would make no difference to him, and be as balm to the questioning spirit opposite; yet he dared not speak good of the man whom he counted rotten to the core. The parson sighed and pressed the matter no further. He desired, he said, to see Dick's grave. Then he hoped to return to England.

Now Dick had made his plans. In a new country, where five years bring amazing changes, it is easy to play pranks, even in churchyards. In the San Lorenzo cemetery were many nameless graves, and the sexton chanced to be an illiterate foreigner who could neither read nor write. So Dick identified a forlorn mound as his last resting-place, and told the sexton that a marble cross would be erected there under his (Dick's) direction. Then he tipped the man, and bought a monument, taking care to choose one sufficiently time-stained. There are scores of such in every marble-worker's yard. Upon it were cut Dick's initials, a date, and an appropriate text. Within three days of the receipt of Mr. Carteret's letter, the cross was standing in the cemetery. None knew or cared whence it came. Moreover, Dick had passed unrecognised through the town where he had once ruffled it so gaily as Lord Carteret. He had changed greatly, as he said, and for obvious reasons he had never visited the mission town since his bogus death and burial.

Thus it came to pass that Dick and his father travelled together to San Lorenzo, and together stood beside the cross in the cemetery. Presently Dick walked away ; and then the old man knelt down, bareheaded, and prayed fervently for many minutes. Later, the father pointed a trembling finger at the initials. "Why," he demanded querulously, "did they not give the lad his full name ?" And to this natural question Dick had nothing to say.

"It seems," murmured the old man mournfully, "that Mr. Crisp, with all his kindness, felt that the name should perish also. Well, amen, amen. Will you give me your arm, sir ?"

So, arm in arm, they passed from the pretty garden of sleep. Dick was really moved, and the impulse stirred within him to make full confession there and then. But he strangled it, and his jaw grew set and hard. As yet he was in ignorance of the change in his father's fortunes. Mr. Carteret assumed none of the outward signs of prosperity. He wore the clothes of a poor parson, and his talk flowed along the old channels, a limpid stream not without sparkle, but babbling of no Pactolian sands. And then, quite suddenly and simply, he said that he had fallen heir to a large estate, and that he wished to set aside so much money as a memorial of his son, to be expended as the experience of the bishop of the diocese might direct.

" You—you are a rich man ? " faltered Dick.

" My son, sir, had he lived, would have been heir to five thousand a year."

Dick gasped, and a lump in his throat stifled speech for a season. Presently he asked politely the nature of Mr. Carteret's immediate plans, and learned that he was leaving San Lorenzo for Santa Barbara on the morrow. Dick had determined not to let his father stray from his sight till he had seen him safe out of the country, but he told himself that he must confer with the 'Bishop' at once. The 'Bishop' must act as go-between ; the 'Bishop,' by Jove ! should let the cat out of the bag ; the 'Bishop' would gladly colour the facts and obscure the falsehoods. So he bade his father good-bye, and the old gentleman thanked him courteously and wished him well. To speak truth, Mr. Carteret was not particularly impressed with Mr. Cartwright, nor sorry to take leave of him. Dick soon secured a buggy, and drove off. *En route* he whistled gaily, and at intervals burst into song. He really felt absurdly gay.

The 'Bishop,' however, pulled a long face when he understood what was demanded of him. " It's too late," said he.

" Do you funk it ? " asked Dick angrily.

" I do," replied his reverence.

" Well, he must be told the facts before he goes south."

Dick little knew, as he spoke so authoritatively, that his father was already in possession of these facts. Within an hour of Dick's departure, Mr. Carteret was walking through the old mission church, chatting with my brother Ajax. From Ajax he learned that at San Clemente, not twenty miles away, was another mission of greater historical interest and in finer preservation than any north of Santa Barbara. Ajax added that there was an excellent hotel at San Clemente, kept by two Englishmen, Cartwright and Crisp. Of course the name Crisp tickled the parson's curiosity, and he asked if this Crisp were any relation to the late Tudor Crisp, who had once lived in or near San Lorenzo. My brother said promptly that these Crisps were one and the same, and was not to be budged from that assertion by the most violent exclamations on the part of the stranger. A synopsis of the Rev. Tudor's history followed, and then the inevitable question: "Who is Cartwright?" Fate ordained that this question was answered by a man who knew that Cartwright was Carteret; and so, at last, the unhappy father realised how diabolically he had been hoaxed. Of his suffering it becomes us not to speak; of his just anger something remains to be said.

He drove up to the San Clemente Hotel as the sun was setting, and both Dick and the 'Bishop' came forward to welcome him, but fell back panic-stricken at sight of his pale face and fiery eyes. Dick slipped aside; the 'Bishop' stood still, rooted in despair.

"Is your name Crisp?"

"Yes," faltered the 'Bishop.'

"The Rev. Tudor Crisp?"

"I—er—once held deacon's orders."

"Can I see you alone?"

The 'Bishop' led the way to his own sanctum, a snug retreat, handy to the bar, and whence an eye could be kept on the bar-tender. The 'Bishop' was a large man, but he halted feebly in front of the other, who, dilated in his wrath, strode along like an avenging archangel, carrying his cane as it might be a flaming sword.

"Now, sir," said Dick's father, as soon as they were alone, "what have you to say to me?"

The 'Bishop' told the story from beginning to end, not quite truthfully.

"You dare to tell me that you hatched this damnable plot?"

The 'Bishop' lied: "Yes—I did."

"And with the money obtained under false pretences you bought a saloon, you, a deacon of the Church of England?"

The 'Bishop' lied: "Yes—I did."

"The devil takes care of his own," said the parson, looking round, and marking the comfort of the room.

"Not always," said the 'Bishop,' thinking of Dick.

"Well, sir," continued the parson, "I'm told that money can work miracles in this country. And, by God! if my money can sent you to gaol, you shall go there, as sure as my name is George Carteret."

"All right," said the 'Bishop.' "I—er—I don't blame you. I think you're behaving with great moderation."

"Moderation! Confound it! sir, are you laughing at me?"

"The Lord forbid!" ejaculated Crisp.

"Men have been shot for less than this."

"There's a pistol in that drawer," said the 'Bishop' wearily. "You can shoot if you want to. Your money can put me into gaol, as you say, and keep you out of it, if—if you use that pistol."

Mr. Carteret stared. The 'Bishop' was beginning to puzzle him. He stared still harder, and the 'Bishop' blushed; an awkward habit that he had never rid himself of. Now a country parson, who is also a magistrate, becomes in time a shrewd judge of men.

"Will you kindly send for my—for your partner?" he said suddenly. "Please sit or stand where you are. I think you'll admit that I have a right to conduct this inquiry in my own way."

Accordingly, Dick was sent for, and soon he took his stand beside the 'Bishop,' facing the flaming blue eyes of his father. Then Mr. Carteret asked him point blank the questions he had put to the other, and received the *same* answers, the 'Bishop' entering an inarticulate demurrer.

"It appears," said Mr. Carteret, "that there are two ways of telling this story. One of you, possibly, has told the truth; the other has unquestionably lied. I confess," he added dryly, "that my sympathies are with the liar. He is the honester man."

"Yes," said Dick. "I'm about as big a blackguard as you'll find anywhere, but I'm your son all the same. Father—forgive me."

One must confess that Dick played his last trump in a masterly fashion. He knew that whining wouldn't avail him, or any puling hypocrisy. So he told the truth.

"Is that what you want?" said the father sarcastically. "Only that: my forgiveness and my blessing?"

Dick's bold eyes fell beneath this thrust.

"The man who drove me here," continued the father, "told me a curious story. It seems that Mr. Crisp here has toiled and moiled for many years, keeping you in comparative luxury and dleness. Not a word, sir. It's an open secret. For some occult reason he likes to pay this price for your company. Having supported you so ong, I presume he is prepared to support you to the end?"

"He's my friend," said the 'Bishop' stoutly.

"My son," said the old man solemnly, "died six years ago, and he can never, *never*," the second word rang grimly out, "be raised from the dead.

That man there," his voice faltered for the first time, " is another son whom I do not know—whom I do not want to know—let him ask himself if he is fit to return with me to England, to live with those gentlewomen, his sisters, to inherit the duties and responsibilities that even such wealth as mine bring in their train. He knows that he is not fit. Is he fit to take my hand ? "

He stretched forth his lean white hand, the hand that had signed so many cheques. Dick did not try to touch it. The 'Bishop' wiped his eyes. The poor fellow looked the picture of misery.

" If there be the possibility of atonement for such as he," continued the speaker—" and God forbid that I should dare to say there is *not*—let that atonement be made here where he has sinned. It seems that the stoppage of his allowance tempted him to commit suicide. I did not know my son was a coward. Now, to close for ever that shameful avenue down which he might slink from the battle, I pledge myself to pay again that five pounds a month during my life, and to secure the same to Richard *Cartwright* after my death, so long as he shall live. That, I think, is all."

He passed with dignity out of the room and into the street, where the buggy awaited him. Dick remained standing, but the 'Bishop' followed the father, noting how, as soon as he had crossed the threshold, his back became bowed and his steps faltered. He touched the old man lightly on the shoulder.

" May I take your hand ? " he asked. " I am not fit, no fitter than Dick, but——"

Mr. Carteret held out his hand, and the 'Bishop' pressed it gently.

" I believe," said Mr. Carteret after a pause, " that you, sir, may live to be an honest man."

" I'll look after Dick," blubbered the 'Bishop,' sorely affected. " Dick will pan out all right—in the end."

But Dick's father shuddered.

" It's very chilly," he said, with a nervous cough. " Good-night, Mr. Crisp. Good-night, and God bless you."

XIX

A RAGAMUFFIN OF THE FOOTHILLS

Jeff looked ruefully at the hot dusty road which curled upward and in front of him like a great white snake. At the top of the grade, where some pines stood out against the blue sky, hung a small reek of dust concealing the figure of his late companion. As Jeff gazed, the reek melted away. The young man told himself that he was alone in the brush foothills, with a lame horse, and a body (his own) so bruised and battered that it seemed to belong to somebody else.

"Hello!" said a voice.

Jeff stared into the chaparral. Wild lilac and big sage bushes, flowering lupins and gilias, bordered the road, for spring was abroad in San Lorenzo county. A boy slipped through the lilacs.

"Jee—whiz!" said the boy. "You've hurt yourself."

"That's right," Jeff replied.

"How did it happen?"

"The plug crossed his feet in the dip yonder, and rolled plum over me. Say—do you want to earn an honest dollar?"

The adjective was emphasised, for none knew better than Jeff that the foothills harboured queer folk. The boy nodded.

"You must get a buggy, sonny."

"A buggy? Anything else? As if buggies grew in the brush-hills!"

Just then Jeff's sanguine complexion turned grey, and his eyes seemed to slip back into his head. The boy perceived a bulging pocket, out of which he whipped a flask. Jeff took a long drink; then he gasped out: "Thunder! you was smart to find that flask. Ah-h-h!"

"You're in a real bad fix," said the boy.

"I *am* in bad shape," Jeff admitted. "If I'd known I was going to lose the use o' myself like this, I wouldn't ha' been so doggoned keen about my friend leavin' me."

"Your friend must be in a partic'lar hurry."

"He was that," Jeff murmured. A queer buzzing in his ears and an overpowering feeling of giddiness made him close his eyes. When he opened them, the boy had disappeared. Jeff saw that his horse had been tied up in the shade of a scrub-oak.

"That boy seems to have some sense," he reflected. "This is a knock-out, sure."

Again he closed his eyes. A blue jay began to chatter; and when he had finished his screed, a cock-quail challenged the silence. Very soon the wilderness was uttering all its familiar sounds. Jeff, lying flat on his back, could hear the rabbits scurrying through the chaparral. After an interminable delay his ears caught the crackle of dry twigs snapped beneath a human foot.

"Feelin' lonesome?"

"I'm mighty glad to see you again," Jeff admitted. "Ah, water! That's a sight better'n whisky."

He drank thirstily, for the sun was high in the heavens, and the road as hot as an oven.

"I reckoned you'd come back," Jeff continued.

"Why?"

"To earn that dollar." He eyed the lad's somewhat ragged overalls. "Say—what do they call ye to home?"

" Bud."

" Bud, eh? Short for brother. Folks got a fam'ly." He reflected that Bud's sister, if he had one, might be nice-looking. " Well, Bud, I'm under obligations to ye, for hitchin' up the plug in the shade. 'Twas thoughtful. Where ha' ye been?"

" I've been hunting Dad. But he's off in the hills. If I could get ye to our camp——"

" The plug'll have to do it. Unhitch him."

Bud untied the animal, who limped even more acutely than his master. Perhaps he lacked his master's grit. Jeff was the colour of parchment when he found himself in the saddle, whereon he sat huddled up, gripping the horn.

"Freeze on," said the boy.

" You bet," Jeff replied laconically.

Bud led the horse a few yards down the road, passing from it into the chaparral. Thence, through a tangled wilderness of scrub-oak and manzanita, down a steep slope, into a pretty cañon.

" Here we are."

A sudden turn of the trail revealed a squatter's hut built of rough lumber, and standing beneath a live-oak. A small creek was babbling its way to the Salinas River. The clearing in front of the hut was strewn with empty tins. A tumble-down shed encircled by a corral was on the other side of the creek. Jeff knew at once that he was looking at one of the innumerable mountain-claims taken up by Eastern settlers in the days of the great land boom, and forsaken by them a couple of years afterwards.

Jeff slid from the saddle on to his sound leg; then, counting rapidly the shining tins, he said reflectively :—

" Bin here about a month, I reckon."

" Yes—Mister—Sherlock—Holmes."

Jeff stared. The ragamuffins of the foothills are not in the habit of reading fiction, although lying comes easy to them.

"Kin you read?" said Jeff.

"I—*kin*," replied Bud, grinning (he had nice teeth). "Kin you?"

"I can cuff a cheeky kid," said Jeff, scowling.

"But you've got to catch him first."

The boy laughed gaily, and ran into the house, as Jeff sat down propping his broad back against a tree.

"Things here are not what they seem," Jeff murmured to his horse, who twitched an intelligent ear, as if he, too, was well aware that this was no home of squatter or miner. And who else of honest men would choose to live in such a desolate spot?

Presently the boy came back, carrying a feed of crushed barley. Then he unsaddled the horse, watered him, and fed him. Jeff grunted approval.

"You're earnin' that dollar—every cent of it."

A delightful fragrance of bacon floated to Jeff's nostrils. Evidently provision had been made for man as well as beast.

"That smells mighty good," said Jeff.

Bud helped him to rise, but after one effort Jeff sank back, groaning.

"It's my boot," he explained. "See—I'm wearing a number eight on a number fifteen hoof. W-w-what? Pull it off? Not for ten thousand dollars. We'll cut it off."

Jeff produced a knife and felt its edge.

"It's sharp," he said, "sharp as you, Bud; but—doggone it! I can't use it."

Bud saw the sweat start on his skin as he tried to pull the injured foot towards him.

"S'pose I do it?" the boy suggested.

"You've not got the nerve, Bud. Why, you're yaller as cheese, you poor little cuss."

"I'm not," said the boy, flushing suddenly.

He took the knife and began to cut the tough leather: a delicate operation, for Jeff's leg from knee to ankle was terribly swollen. Slowly and delicately the knife did its work. Finally, a horribly contused limb was revealed.

"Cold water—and plenty of it," murmured Jeff.

"Or hot?"

"Mebbee hot'd be better."

Bud disappeared, whistling.

"That boy's earning a five-dollar bill," said Jeff. "I'm a liar if he ain't as bright as they make 'em."

The hot water was brought and some linen.

"I feel a heap better," Jeff declared presently.

"How about dinner?"

"Bud, if ever I hev a son I hope he'll be jest like you. Say—you're earning big money—d'ye know it?—and my everlastin' gratitude."

"That's all right. Hadn't I better bring the grub out here? It's nice and cool under this tree."

Jeff nodded. The bacon and beans were brought out and consumed. Bud, however, refused to eat. He preferred to wait for his father. Jeff asked some questions, as he stowed away the bacon and beans.

"Your dad must be an awful nice man," said he.

"He's the best and smartest man in the State," said Bud proudly.

"Is he! And you two are campin' out for yer health—eh? Ye can't fool me, Bud."

"Oh!"

"I sized you up at once as a city boy."

"You're more than half right."

"I'm all right, Bud. In my business I have to be all right. Bless you, it don't do to make mistakes in my business."

" And what is your business ? "

Jeff beamed. He was certainly a good-looking fellow, and warmed by food and, comparatively speaking, free from pain, he was worthy of more than a passing glance.

" I'm deputy-sheriff of San Lorenzo County," he declared, " and mighty proud of it."

" Proud of this yere county ? " said the boy, " or proud of being dep'ty-sheriff ? "

" By Jing ! I'm proud o' both. The county's comin' along fine, and so'm I, Bud. It's a fact, sonny, that I'm held in high esteem as an officer. Why, my boss said to me this very day : ' Jeff,' says he, ' yer makin' a record.' "

" What sort o' record ? "

Jeff flushed slightly. He was not in the habit of " tooting his own horn," as he would have put it, but the boy's face invited confidence.

" A record for dooin' my duty," he answered slowly. " 'Tain't as easy as you might think for."

" No ? "

" Not by no means. Ye see, Bud, in a new country 'tisn't only the real bad eggs that worries us. The community can deal with them. No, no, it's the good fellers gone wrong, the straight 'uns grown crooked, who keep us stirrin'. And, sometimes, when a friend, a neighbour, flies the track, an officer is kind o' tempted to look the other way. See ? "

" And you don't look the other way ? "

Jeff's strong chin stuck out, and his eyes sparkled " You bet I don't."

The boy eyed him attentively. The qualities conspicuous in the pioneer — energy, fortitude, grit, patience—shone finely out of Jeff's eyes.

" I like you, Jeff," said the boy, almost shyly

" Shake," said Jeff. " I like you, Bud."

The two shook hands solemnly.

" Although I am a city boy," said Bud.

" But it beats me what yer doing—here ? "

" Just camping. Dad's a botanist and an entomologist."

" Is that so ? " Jeff's face shone. The presence of these strangers in the wild foothills was adequately explained. Then he laughed, showing strong, even teeth. " I'd like to meet your dad first-rate, and, Bud, I'd like even better to meet your sister."

He punched the boy in the ribs, chuckling to himself. The boy laughed too, freshly and frankly.

" Something like you, I reckon," said Jeff, " only cleaner and——"

" I'm as clean as they make 'em," Bud declared angrily.

" Keep your hair on, sonny. I'll allow yer as clean as they make boys, mebbee cleaner, but we're speaking o' girls. Have ye got her picture ? "

" Whose picture ? "

" Your sister's."

" Well, I declare ! How do you know I've got a sister ? "

" I know it," said Jeff. " Call it instinct. Didn't I tell ye that in my business I've got to jest naturally know things ? I jump, Bud, where the ordinary citizen might, so ter speak, crawl."

The boy laughed gaily. Then he ran off, returning in a minute with a small leather case. Out of this he took a cabinet photograph, which he handed to Jeff. That gentleman became excited at once.

" I knew it—I knew it ! " he exclaimed. " She's a—*peach* ! Bud, I'm mighty glad ye showed me this. Jee—whiz ! Yes, and like you, only ten thousand times better-lookin'. What's her name, Bud ? "

" You don't want to know her name."

" I want to—the worst kind. My! Look at that cunning little curl! And her shape! You know nothing o' that yet, Bud, but I tell ye, sir, yer sister is put up just right according to my notions. Not too tall. Them strung-out, trained-to-a-hair, high-falutin girls never did fetch me. I like 'em round, and soft, and innocent. What's her name, sonny?"

" Sarah."

" Sairy! Bud, I don't believe that. Sairy! I never did cotton to Sairy. Yer pullin' my leg, ye young scallywag. The nerve! No—ye don't."

Jeff had stretched out a long, lean arm, and seized the boy by the shoulder in a grasp which tightened cruelly.

" Oh—oh!"

" Tell me her right name, ye little cuss, or I'll squeeze ye into pulp."

" Lemmee go! Dad calls her Sadie."

Jeff released the shoulder, grinning.

" Sadie—that's a heap better. I—I could love to—to distraction a girl o' the name o' Sadie."

" If Sadie were here——" Bud had removed himself to a respectful distance, and was now glaring at Jeff, and rubbing his bruised shoulder.

" I wish she was, I wish she was. You were saying, Bud——"

" I was saying that if Sadie were here, she'd fix you mighty quick."

" Would she? God bless her!" He stared sentimentally at the photograph.

" Yes, she would. She'd let you know that a girl may be round—an' soft—an' innocent—and a holy terror, too, when a big, blundering galoot of a dep'ty-sheriff talks o' loving somebody to whom he's never been introduced, and never likely to be, neither."

Jeff looked up in amazement.

"Why, Bud; why, sonny—ye're real mad! Why, you silly little whipper-snapper, ye don't think I'd talk that way if the young lady was around. Great Scot! Look ye here! Now—now I ain't goin' to hurt ye any. Come nearer. Ye won't? Well, then, don't! But, strictly between ourselves, I'll tell ye something, although it's agen myself. If your sister was here, right now, I—I'm so doggoned bashful—I wouldn't have a word to say—that's a fact."

"I wish she were here," said Bud, savagely.

"Now, Bud; that's a real nasty one. Ye don't mean that. Did I hurt yer shoulder, sonny?"

"Hurt it? I'll bet it's black and blue most already."

"I'll bet it ain't. Pull down your shirt, an' let's see. Black and blue? You air a little liar."

Bud slowly pulled up the sleeve of his faded blue jumper. Hand and wrist were burnt brown by the sun, but above, the flesh was white and soft. Just below the elbow flamed the red and purple marks left by Jeff's fingers.

"The shoulder's a sight worse than that," said Bud sulkily. Jeff displayed honest concern.

"Pore little Bud," said he, patting the boy's hand which lay in his own. "It is lucky fer me Miss Sadie ain't round. I reckon she *would* fix me for this. And I shouldn't have a word for her, as I was tellin' ye. She'd think me the biggest kind of a mug."

So speaking, he picked up the photograph and half slipped it into the case.

"'Twon't do fer me to look at her," he murmured; "but if ever there was a case——"

"Eh?"

"Never mind."

"What were you going to say?"

"Somethin' very fullish."

"Say it, Jeff. I'll not give ye away to Sadie. Honest, I won't."

"I believe," said Jeff solemnly, "that I've got it where the bottle got the cork. It's a curious sort o' feeling, not unpleasant, but kind o' squirmy."

"What in thunder are you at?"

"It's love, Bud—love at first sight. Now, mind—yer not to give me away. I'm in love end over end with your sister. Don't git mad! She'll never know it."

"Are you often taken this way?"

'Never before, by Jing! That's what's so queer. Mebbee I pitched on my head. Mebbee I'm delirious."

"Mebbee you always were—half-baked. Looks like it, I must say. Give me the case."

"Any more sisters, Bud? I reckon not. The mould must ha' been broke when Miss Sadie was born. One'll make trouble enough for we men. Is there another, Bud?"

"No."

"There's another picture in there."

"Yes—Dad's."

Now it chanced that as Jeff drew the portrait of Bud's father from the case the boy had turned, and so missed the amazing expression of surprise, dismay, horror, that flitted into Jeff's honest face, and for the moment distorted it. But when he spoke his voice was the same, and his features were composed.

"This is your—dad?"

"Yes. I call him a peach."

"It's a fine head—sure," murmured Jeff.

Bud bent over him, eager to sing the praises of his sire. But, for the first time since man and boy had met, Jeff's face assumed a hard, professional look. Bud eyed him interrogatively.

"Does your leg hurt any?"

"N-n-o."

" I'll fetch some more hot water, if you say so."

"I'm feelin' a heap easier—in my leg."

He put the two photographs into the case, closed it, and handed it to Bud with a sigh.

" Maybe you will meet Sadie some day," said Bud, taking the case.

" Maybe," Jeff replied, with an indifference which made the boy stare. Jeff was gazing across the foothills with a queer steely glint in his blue eyes. Bud ran into the house.

Instantly, Jeff was alert. He pulled a tattered handbill from his pocket, smoothed it out, and read it with darkening brows. The bill offered a handsome reward for any information which would lead to the arrest of one Sillett, a defaulting assistant-cashier of a Santa Barbara bank. Sillett and his *daughter* had disappeared in a springboard, drawn by a buckskin horse, and were supposed to have travelled south, in the hope of crossing the border into Mexico. At the head of the bill was a rough woodcut of Sillett. Jeff crumpled up the sheet of paper, and stuffed it into his pocket.

" It's him—sure 'nough," he growled. Then he gasped suddenly, " Jee-roosalem! Bud is a rosebud! "

He smiled, frowned, and tugged at his moustache as Bud appeared with some more hot water. Jeff blushed.

" You're real kind, but I hate to give ye all this trouble."

Bud, after bathing the swollen leg, glanced up sharply.

" You're as red as the king of hearts. You ain't going to have a fever ? "

" I do feel kind o' feverish," Jeff admitted.

Bud lightly touched his forehead.

" Why, it's burning hot, I do declare."

Jeff closed his eyes, murmuring confusedly, " I b'lieve it'd help me some if you was to stroke my derned head."

Bud obediently smoothed his crisp curls. Jeff's forehead was certainly hot, and it grew no cooler beneath the touch of Bud's fingers.

" Hello ! " exclaimed Bud, a few minutes later. " Here's Dad coming across the creek."

. . . .

Sillett advanced leisurely, not seeing the figures under the live-oak. He carried a tin box and a butterfly-net. He was dressed in the brown overalls of Southern California, stained and discoloured by sun and tar-weed. His face, brown as the overalls, had, however, a pinched look, and in his eyes lay a curious tenseness familiar enough to deputy-sheriffs. For the rest, he had a mild forehead, which he was wiping as he crossed the creek, a pleasant mouth, and a chin a thought too delicately modelled for a man. He walked soberly, with the dragging stride of a tired pedestrian. He was tall, thin, and angular.

Bud ran to meet him.

" We've comp'ny," he cried, indicating Jeff. Sillett quickened his step.

" Company ? "

Sillett met Jeff's glance with a simple bow, and the inevitable remark, " Hurt yourself ? "

Jeff explained. While describing his misadventure he decided that Bud could not be a party to the father's crime. Sillett asked for permission to examine the wounded leg Presently he asked Jeff to stand up.

" Oh, Dad ! " protested Bud.

Jeff obeyed, glad to discover that he could stand upon the injured foot.

" Same thing happened to me once," Sillett remarked. " The tight boot caused more than half the trouble. Sit down, Mr. —— ? "

" Wells. Jefferson Wells."

" Thank you. My name is—of no service to you. And this is my daughter—Sarah. Run away, Sadie."

Jeff, watching the daughter, thought her confusion the prettiest thing he had ever seen.

" You are a cowboy, I presume ? " said Sillett, as Bud disappeared. Not waiting for Jeff's answer, he went on fluently : " I'm sure I can trust you ; you have an honest face, sir. I'm collecting certain plants and butterflies, but—I have other reasons for camping out. My daughter has played the boy, because a boy is safe in these wild hills ; an unprotected girl might be molested. We will do what we can for you. You, I am sure, will respect this confidence."

Sillett played his trumps boldly, not knowing that he was speaking to a deputy-sheriff. Jeff said nothing. Sillett, after asking if the horse had been fed and watered, followed his daughter into the hut. Jeff groaned to himself. " Mighty soon I'll be wishing I'd never been born ! "

However, assured that he was alone, he carefully examined his six-shooter, and began to reckon what chances there were for and against arresting Sillett single-handed. Ordinarily, he was quick enough at such calculations, but Bud introduced confusion into every sum. " I'm in an awful hole," reflected the unhappy Jeff.

The hole became a bottomless pit when Bud appeared in a pretty linen frock, and asked him demurely how he fared.

" You're looking worse," she said.

Changing her dress, she had cast off with the rough overalls such rugosities of manner, speech, and intonation as belonged to the ragamuffin of the foothills. Poor Jeff assumed his " society " manner and accent.

" If I'd only known," he began lamely.

" You never suspected ? "

A note of anxiety escaped Jeff's ears.

" N-n-no. Of course not. Why, think how I handled you."

Sadie blushed.

" I'll forget everything," she whispered, showing a couple of dimples, " and we'll begin all over again, Mr.—Wells."

His confusion, which she attributed to bashfulness, encouraged the shameless coquette to add : " Maybe you liked me better as Bud ? " Jeff was scarlet as he replied : " I liked Bud first-rate, but Bud'll remember what I said about his sister." Then he quite spoiled the effect of this happy phrase by adding hurriedly : " Say, I'd just as lief you didn't tell your father that I am a deputy-sheriff."

Sadie raised her dark brows.

" I thought you were so proud of that."

" I tooted my own horn, like a tenderfoot."

" But I liked what you said, Mr. Wells. That's the part I shan't forget. About doing your duty, you know. Dad would like that too. He's done his duty, has Dad—always."

" I'll allow he's done his duty by you."

She laughed gaily ; then, seeing with a woman's quick eyes that the man was in pain, she said for the second time, " I know you're feeling worse, Mr. Wells."

A wiser than Jeff would have assented to this. Jeff rose hastily and walked a few paces.

" I'm most well," he declared irritably.

" Then what ails you ? "

Jeff sat down again, smiling nervously.

" Well, Miss Sadie, I was thinking of the cruellest thing in this cruel world."

" My ! What's that ? "

" Why do the innocent suffer for the sins o' the guilty ? "

" You do fly the track." She paused, gazing first at Jeff's troubled face, and then at the scene about them. The enchantress, Spring, had touched all things with her magical fingers The time had come when

"Half of the world a bridegroom is,
And half of the world a bride."

Very soon—within a month at most—the creek which ran so joyfully to the great ocean yonder would have run altogether out of sight, leaving a parched and desolate watercourse in its place. The grass, now a vivid green, bespangled with brilliant poppies, would fade into premature age and ugliness. The trees would have assumed the dust-covered livery of summer. The birds would be mute.

Sadie shrugged, protestingly, her slender shoulders.

"Suppose we talk of something else this lovely day?"

But Jeff paid no attention. In a crude, boyish fashion he had come to a decision.

"Shall I tell you a story?"

"Oh, please!"

"It happened to a friend of mine, a man I knew real well."

"A love story, Mr. Wells?"

"There's love in it, Miss Sadie."

"I'm glad of that."

"This man, my friend, he was a brother deputy o' mine, came to be twenty-six without ever falling in love."

"My! He must have been hard-hearted—your friend."

"Mebbee. Well, one fine day he met his mate——"

"What was she like?"

"Like? Why, she was the sweetest thing on earth. I'd as lief try to describe a day such as this——"

"Oh! I know what's coming. You fell in love with your friend's sweetheart. Poor Mr. Wells!"

Jeff ignored this interruption.

"I was saying that my friend met *his* mate, nobody's else's, and though he'd never met her before, by Jing! he knew right off she was his mate."

"Love at first sight."

"That's right. Love at first sight."

Sadie's face and figure perceptibly relaxed. Her eyes softened delightfully. With parted lips she seemed to hang upon Jeff's next words.

"Unfortunately, she was the daughter of a thief."

"A thief!"

"That ain't the right word. Embezzler, I reckon, would fit better. Leastwise, he'd made away with other folks' money, meanin' to put it back, no doubt, if he happened to strike the right lead. Luck was dead against him. Mind ye, he was a good citizen enough, as Westerners go. I don't deny that he'd average up as well as most. I remember the case well, because I read about it in the papers. The dry years had bust him, and the most of his friends too. Some o' these friends he'd helped. He was on their notes of hand, ye understand?"

He glanced at her sharply. Would she understand? Would she guess? No. In the pure, clear eyes upturned to his he read pity, sympathy interest—nothing more. She nodded.

"When times mended in Southern California he thought he saw his chance to get back all he'd lost: just one o' those dead sure shots which will miss fire. He'd not a cent of his own, so he borrowed, without askin' leave, a few hundreds, that was all, jest a few hundreds from somebody else."

" He was a—thief," said Sadie calmly.

" It's too hard a word that. Now then, I'm getting to the point. My friend, deputy-sheriff like me, found himself in this hell of—I mean in this terrible tight place. He was sent to arrest the father of the girl he loved."

" Oh-h-h ! "

This prolonged exclamation sadly puzzled Jeff, whose claim to consideration at the hands of many friends was a guileless transparency of purpose, a candour and simplicity unhappily too rare. Now, his climax, so artfully introduced, provoked nothing more satisfactory than this " Oh-h-h ! "

" Well," continued Jeff, gazing almost fiercely into Sadie's eyes, " my friend found the father, and he knew that he could arrest him, or he could earn the everlastin' gratitude of the girl by letting him escape—and *helping* him to escape."

" And what did your friend do ? " Sadie asked quietly.

" What do you think he did, Miss Sadie ? "

" Did the girl know that her father was a thief ? "

" She was as innocent as Mary's little lamb."

" I don't know what your friend did," said Sadie, in a clear, emphatic voice, " but I do know what he ought to have done. His first duty was to his State."

Jeff stared, and then laughed.

" To his State. That's so. Yes, yes ; and that's how my friend acted. He did arrest the father, and the daughter—why, o' course, she never spoke to him again."

" It's a sad story," said Sadie, after a pause. " I'm sorry you told it to me to-day, because——" her voice faltered.

" Yes," said Jeff, " because——"

" Because it has been so pleasant to-day—for me, I mean."

She looked down, blushing. Jeff seized her hand. Sadie tried, not very hard, to pull it away. Jeff felt the muscles relaxing, the slight form swayed towards him. Suddenly he released her.

" O, my God!" he exclaimed. " You are right, I feel in all my bones you're dead right. I ought to do my duty. I'm feeling and behaving like a madman."

Sadie stared at him in troubled silence. She believed that in losing his heart the poor fellow had lost his wits also. Yet she was sensible that love for her lay at the root of his distress. And his pain, for his suffering was pitiful to behold, puckered her brows, twisted her lips. With a soft cry she touched timidly his shoulder.

" If you think," she smiled faintly, " that because we've only known each other a few hours, I——"

Jeff laughed. The laugh hurt the girl, so that she shrank from him. So engrossed were the pair that neither marked Sillett as he opened the door of the hut. He advanced a couple of steps, smoking a pipe, and then paused, astonished, as Jeff's next words reached him.

" Look at here," he burst out. " That story—— It's my own story. I left San Lorenzo yesterday afternoon to arrest your father. The sheriff an' me knew he was somewhere in these foothills."

" You have come to arrest—Dad ? "

" That's it."

She stared at him confusedly, trying to recall his story. Jeff waited.

" You called him a thief. Dad—a thief! How dare you ? How dare you ? It's a lie, or—or," she faltered, " or a mistake."

" No mistake," said Jeff wretchedly.

He had risen. Man and maid stared fiercely into each other's faces. Behind them, Sillett stood quietly observant, but his right hand stole down to his pocket.

" Hold up your hands! " he said sharply.

Jeff and the girl sprang apart. Sillett had levelled a pistol at the deputy-sheriff, repeating his words with one addition : " *Quick !* " Jeff raised his hands.

" He carries a ' gun,' " said Sillett to his daughter. " Take it from him."

She obeyed. Her face was white as milk, but not with fear. The man who held the pistol had ceased for the moment to bear any resemblance to her father, but assuredly he was the defaulter whom Jeff Wells and the sheriff sought. The expression upon his face revealed that, if nothing else. Sadie removed the pistol and brought it to Sillett.

" In the hut, on a nail behind the door, is a piece of cord. Fetch it ! "

She fetched it.

" Tie his hands behind his back. Tie 'em good and firm. Take your time. Make a job of it. That's it. Now, then, hitch the loose ends round that scrub-oak. That's right. Now go into the house, and slip into your overalls. We'll be shifting camp in less than half-an-hour."

" Dad ! "

" Well ? "

" It's true, then ? "

He smiled grimly.

" Yes—it's true. Get a move on you. Mr. Wells and I are going to have a little talk."

She walked slowly towards the hut ; then suddenly she turned, flying back on nimble feet.

" Dad," she said quickly. " Mr. Wells will help us, if you ask him, if—if *I* ask him." She approached Jeff. " I told you that your duty was to the State," she continued, " but I take that back. Do you hear ? Save Dad ! I don't care what he has done to others, he's always been so good to me. And if you will help us, I—I——"

" Sadie ! "

Sillett's voice was very harsh.

"Yes, Dad."

"Leave us. Not a word, child. Go!"

She moved away, the tears trickling from her eyes. Nothing was said till the door had closed behind her; then Jeff broke the silence, in a voice with a strange rasp to it.

"I *will* help you, Mr. Sillett."

Sillett thrust his weapon into his pocket, and came close to the speaker, eyeing him attentively. An impartial observer might have pronounced the younger man to be the defaulter.

"You'll help me—eh? How?"

"I can get you safe into Mexico."

"Can you?"

"At a word from me the sheriff'll be huntin' somewheres else. See?"

"I see."

"Don't think you'll squeeze through without me. I reckon you've a springboard and a buckskin in the barn over there?"

"Maybe."

"The officers are looking for that buckskin in every little burg between Santa Cruz and San Diego. You can't pack your grub and blankets a-foot. I can supply everything. Nobody'll suspect me."

"Why not?"

"Because—because o' my record."

"Oh. It's a clean one, is it?"

"It is that."

"Sadie cottoned to you right away. Because she sized you up as straight, I surmise."

The speaker smoked silently for a moment; Jeff held his tongue, but his cheeks were red and hot.

"Sadie may sour on me now," said the father heavily.

"Sour on you, Mr. Sillett! Not she."

Sillett frowned. Then he opened a knife and slashed the cord which bound Jeff. The fingers which held his pipe were trembling.

"You'll let me fix things ? " said Jeff, in a low voice.

" And then—suppose—suppose Sadie soured on you ? "

" I'll risk that," Jeff answered slowly. " She's more'n likely to."

" Um."

" You're going to give me a free hand ? "

" No."

The monosyllable burst from his lips with a violence that indicated the rending asunder of strong barriers.

" No," he repeated. " One of us, Jefferson Wells, must be an honest man. I ain't going to whine about the luck, but I stole—I stole—for her. I wanted to give her what she'd always had from me : a pretty home, nice clothes, a good time. And what's the result ? " He laughed hoarsely. " This,—this hut, those overalls, beans and bacon to eat, and now—now—the knowledge that her dad is a thief. Well, she's cottoned to you. I read it in her face. Quick work, they'd say back East, but in this new country folks have to think quick and act quick. I can think quick and act quick. You want her ? "

" Worse than I ever wanted anything in my life."

" You can take care of her ? "

" I am well fixed. A nest-egg in the bank, a good salary, and a pair of arms that can carry a heavier load than she'll ever be."

Sillett nodded ; then he spoke very deliberately : " I'm going back to Santa Barbara to face the music. I shall give myself up. Hold on—let me finish ! I know something of women, and Sadie is the daughter of a good mother. It's lucky she's dead, poor soul ! Don't you ever dare to tell Sadie *that you weakened*. When she lies awake nights—and she will—it may comfort her some to think that her husband is an honest man. I'm going to hit the trail now. When Sadie comes out o' there, tell her with my love, that I've left her in your charge."

XX

DENNIS

THE odd thing was that his name was really Dennis. In the West, Dennis stands generically for the under dog, for the man who is left. His name is—Dennis! Why? The man in this story was christened Dennis, and, being a native son of the Golden West, he took particular pains to keep the fact a secret from the " boys." When he punched cattle on our range he was known as " Kingdom Come " Brown, because, even in those days, it was plain to tenderfeet that physically and intellectually D. Brown, cowboy, was not likely to inherit the kingdoms of the earth.

Ever since he had been breeched ill-fortune had marked him for her own. Nevertheless, he was rich in the possession of a temperament which soared like a lark above suffering and disappointment. He believed steadfastly that his " turn " would come. " It ain't goin' to be like this yere —always," was a phrase familiar to us. To this we replied, " Not much! "

In our hearts we, too, believed that the turn would come, but that, humanly speaking, it would occur in the sweet by-and-by. Hence the nickname. The hardest nuts admitted that Brown was travelling upon the rough road which leads upwards. His golden slippers were waiting for him—sure! He set an example which none followed, but which all, in sober moments, commended. He neither drank nor swore. He remained faithful to the memory of a woman who had married somebody else. For her sake he sold his horse and saddle, and became a lumberman. The losing of his Mamie was, of course, the heaviest of his many bludgeonings. She was a simple soul, like D. Brown, inured to hard work, and at the mercy of a drunken father, who had perilously escaped by the very skin of his teeth from the clutches of Judge Lynch. To give to Mamie a home had been the consuming desire of poor Dennis. For this he pinched and saved till, at last, the needful sum lay snug in a San Lorenzo bank. Then the bank " bust "!

Without a word to Mamie, Dennis drifted away to some distant range, and before he was seen again Tom Barker had appeared. Why Tom, a big, brutal lumberman, desired to marry Mamie, no longer young, never pretty, penniless, and admittedly fond of Dennis, must remain a mystery. Why Mamie married Tom is a question easily answered. Tom was " boss " of a logging-camp, and none had ever denied his Cæsarean attributes. He had the qualities and vices conspicuously absent in Dennis. He was Barker, of Barker's Inlet. The mere mention of his name in certain saloons was enough to put the fear of God into men even bigger than himself. A sort of malefic magnetism exuded from every pore of his skin. When he held up his finger Mamie crawled to him. She believed, probably, that she was escaping from a drunken father, and she knew that Tom could and would supply many things for which she had yearned—a parlour, for instance, possibly a piano, and a silk dress. She would have taken Dennis without these amenities, but Dennis had fled to the back of Nowhere without even saying good-bye.

Months after the marriage Dennis came back. Ajax described the wedding and the subsequent flitting to Barker's Inlet. Dennis listened, stroking his too thin, straggling moustache. Next day he sold his horse and saddle.

When he appeared at Barker's Inlet and asked for a job, Tom Barker smiled. He had heard of Dennis, and he knew that Mamie had given to Dennis what never would be given to him—the love and confidence of a simple woman. Into his savage bull-head crept the determination to torment these two unsophisticated creatures delivered by Fate to be his slaves, and as such at his mercy.

Accordingly, Dennis was engaged.

Tom's position at the inlet must be defined. Some years before he had been known as a timber-cruiser—that is to say, a man who " locates," during his wanderings through forests primeval, belts of timber which will be likely to allure the speculative lumberman. Barker, therefore, had discovered the inlet which bore his name, and in consideration of his services, and with a due sense of his physical and mental qualifications, he had been appointed boss of the camp by the real owners—a syndicate of rich men, who knew that logs were worth ten dollars a thousand feet, and that the man to make them so was Tom Barker. The syndicate wisely gave Tom a free hand, knowing that, in everything which concerned the working of men and machinery to the limit, Tom would begin at the point where their less elastic consciences might leave off. The syndicate, therefore, remained in Victoria, or Vancouver, or San Francisco, and said of Tom that he was a rustler from " Way back, and as lively as they make 'em."

It will be guessed that Tom's principal difficulty was engaging men. Having engaged them, he was certain to get plenty of work out of them, and they couldn't leave till they had earned sufficient money to take themselves elsewhere. All the boys came to Tom stoney-broke; otherwise they would never have "signed on." To be treated like a hog, to root assiduously for Tom, or to starve, stared several able-bodied men in the face. One genial Californian remarked, "It's a choice between Death and Damnation."

You will now understand why Tom smiled when Dennis Brown asked for a job.

He knew that Dennis was a cow-puncher, and not a star performer on his own pitch, and he had only to look at the man to realise how unfitted he was for the rough work of a logging-camp A derisive chuckle gurgled from his huge, hairy throat as he growled out—

"Say! This ain't like teachin' Sunday-school."

"I know it ain't," said Dennis cheerfully. But his heart sank at the mention of the Sunday-school. Long ago he had taught in a Sunday-school. It was simply awful to think that the piety of a too ardent youth was now to be held up to the ridicule of the boys.

"I believe your name is—Dennis?" continued the boss of Barker's Inlet.

"It is," our unhappy friend admitted.

"Go up to the bunk-house," commanded Tom, "and tell Jimmy Doolan, with my regards, to take particler care of yer. I'll speak to him later." Then, as Dennis was moving off, he added, in a rasping voice: "You an' my wife is acquainted, eh? Wal, when you've dropped your blankets, come up to the house and say howdy."

Dennis went up to the house. There was one house at the inlet: a four-roomed frame building with three coats of paint on it and a red roof. It stood some distance from the collection of shacks and cabins at the mouth of the Coho River, and it overlooked some of the most glorious scenery in the world. In front stretched the Sound, a silver sea just dimpled by the soft spring breeze. To right and left, and behind, lay the forest—that silent land of the North, illimitable as space, everlastingly green when the snows had melted, shadowy, mysterious, terrible!

As Dennis approached the house he heard a terrific sound—the crash of a felled and falling tree—some giant who had held his own in the struggle for existence when William the Norman ruled in England. And then, from all points of the compass, the echoes, in varying cadence, repeated that tremendous, awe-inspiring sound—the last sobbing cry of a Titan.

A moment later Mamie received him and ushered him into the parlour, where a small piano, a table of shellwork, and crimson plush curtains challenged the interest and curiosity of all who were privileged to behold them. "Let me take yer hat," said Mamie.

The hand she held out trembled slightly. Dennis perceived that she was thinner and paler.

"Yer well fixed," he murmured. "An' happy as a clam, I reckon?"

"I'd oughter be happy," said Mamie dubiously. Then she added hastily, "Never expected to see you in a logging-camp."

"No? Wal, I kinder wondered how you was makin' it. You don't look extry peart, Mis' Barker. Lonesome for ye, ain't it?"

Already he knew that except for a few squaws she was the only woman in the camp.

"I don't mind that," said Mrs. Barker.

Something in her tone arrested his attention. Stupid and slow though he was, he divined that Mamie's thin, white cheeks and trembling hands were not caused by lonesomeness. He stared at her intently, till the blood gushed into her face. And then and there he knew almost everything.

"Got a baby?" he asked thickly.

She answered savagely, " No, I haven't, thank God ! "

Above the chimneypiece hung an enlarged photograph of her husband, taken a couple of days after his wedding. Mr. Barker had faced the camera with the same brutal complacency which distinguished all his actions. He smiled grimly, thrusting forward his heavy lower jaw, inviting inspection, obviously pleased to exhibit himself as a ferocious and untamed animal. Through the sleeves of his ill-cut black coat the muscles of his arms and shoulders showed bulgingly. The ordinary observer, looking at the photograph for the first time, would be likely to reflect : " Here is a ruffian who needs a licking, but he has not got it yet."

" How's paw ? " said Mamie.

" Las' time I seen the old man he was paralysed drunk, as usual."

" Yes, he would be that," assented Mamie indifferently.

After this, conversation languished, and very soon the visitor took his leave. When Mamie handed to him his hat she said awkwardly, " You never told me good-bye " ; and to this indictment Dennis replied laconically, " Holy Mackinaw ! I couldn't."

Those who know the wilder portions of this planet will understand that all was said between these two weaklings who had loved each other dearly. Dennis returned to the bunk-house. Mamie ran to her bed-room and cried her eyes out.

Within a week the camp knew two facts concerning the newcomer. His name was—Dennis ! And he had loved Tom Barker's dough-faced wife !

Tom's selection of his first instrument of torture indicated subtlety. He bought from a Siwash Indian the most contemptible-looking cur ever beheld at the inlet, and he christened the unfortunate beast—Dennis. There was a resemblance between dog and man. Each, in the struggle for existence, had received more than his due share of kicks, and the sense of this in any animal manifests itself unmistakably. And each, moreover, exhibited the same amazing optimism, which is, perhaps, a sure sign of a mind not quite balanced.

Dennis, the dog, followed his new master wherever he went. Tom would introduce him with the remark, "His name is Dennis, *too*." And if Dennis, the man, happened to be present, Tom would swear at the dog, calling him every evil name which came to the tip of the foulest tongue in British Columbia. Always, at the end of these commination services, Tom would say to Dennis, the man, "I an't a-speakin' to you, old socks, so keep yer hair on."

That the cow-puncher (who, in his day, must have carred a "gun") did keep on his hair became a topic of talk amongst the boys, confirming a conviction that Dennis had been aptly named. Certainly he lacked backbone and jawbone. Moreover, change of skies brought to him no change of luck. Within a fortnight he was badly hurt, and obliged to remain in bed for nearly a week.

"I got mixed up with a log," he explained to Mamie. "It bruk loose, an' I didn't quite get outer the way. See?"

"Me, too," whispered Mamie. "Same trouble here—'zactly."

Twice while he lay upon his back she brought to the bunk-house a chocolate layer cake and some broth. Upon the occasion of her third visit she came empty-handed, with her too pale eyes full of tears, and her heart full of indignation.

"I ain't got nothing," she muttered. "Tom says it's his grub."

"That's all right," replied Dennis, noting that she walked stiffly. "But, look ye here; he ain't been wallopin' ye, has he?"

"Yes, he has. When he was through I tole him I'd sooner have his blows than his kisses any day."

"I hadn't oughter hev come here," said Dennis.

"Never saw the sun shine till you did," murmured Mamie.

At this he tried to take her hand, but she evaded his grasp. Then, with an extraordinary dignity, looking deep into the man's eyes, she said slowly: "I tole you that because it's God's truth, and sorter justifies your comin'; but I aim ter be an honest woman, and you must help me to remain so."

With that she flitted away.

Next day Dennis went back to work. And what work, for a man never at best strong, and now enfeebled by severe pain and illness! Some magnificent timber had been found a couple of miles inland, situated not too far from the Coho. The experts had already felled, stripped, and sawed into logs the huge trees. To Dennis and others remained the arduous labour of guiding, with the help of windlasses, these immense logs to the river, whence they would descend in due time to the inlet, there to be joined together into vast rafts, later on again to be towed to their destination. Of all labour, this steering of logs through dense forest to their appointed waterway is the hardest and roughest. Dennis, of course, wore thick gloves, but in spite of these his hands were mutilated horribly, because he lacked the experience to handle the logs with discretion. Even the best men are badly knocked about at this particular job, and the duffers are very likely to be killed outright.

At the end of ten lamentable days Dennis came to the conclusion that Tom Barker wanted to kill him by the Chinese torture of Ling, or death by a thousand cuts. More than one of the boys said: " Why don't you get what dough is comin' to ye and skip ? " Dennis shook his head. Not being able to explain to himself why he stayed, he held his tongue, and thus gained a reputation for grit which lightened other burdens. Jim Doolan, the big Irishman, was of opinion that Dennis Brown was little better than a derned baby with a soft spot in his head, but he admitted that the cow-puncher was " white," and obviously bent upon self-destruction. By this time the camp knew that the boss was taking an unholy interest in Dennis, although he continued to treat him with derisive civility. The rage he couldn't suppress was vented upon the dog. And Dennis never saw the poor beast kicked or beaten without reflecting: " He does that to Mamie when nobody ain't lookin'." In his feeble fashion he tried to interfere. Dollars to Tom Barker were dearer than cardinal virtues, and he had never been known to refuse an opportunity to make a bit on any deal. Dennis offered to buy the dog.

" What's he worth ? " said Tom, thrusting out his jaw.

" I'll give five for him."

" Five ? For a dog that I've learned to love ? Not much ! "

" Ten ? "

" Nope ! "

" Fifteen ? "

Tom laughed.

" You ain't got money enough to buy him," he said. " I'm going to have more fun than a barrel o' monkeys out o' this yere dog, and don't you forget it ! "

After this Dennis, the Sunday-school teacher, the man whose golden slippers were awaiting him in the sweet by-and-by, began to lie awake at night and wrestle with the problem : " Is a man ever justified in breaking the sixth commandment ? " The camp held that Tom bore a charmed life. Men had tried to kill him more than once, and had perished ingloriously in the attempt. His coolness and courage were indisputable. There are moments in a lumberman's business when nothing will save an almost impossible situation but the instant exercise of the most daring and devil-may-care pluck, determination, and skill. Tom was never found wanting at such moments. To see him " ride a log " was a sight to inspire admiration and respect in a Texas broncho-buster. To kill such a superb animal might well rack a simple and guileless cowboy whose name was—Dennis.

It is relevant to mention that Dennis, the dog, licked the hand that beat him, fawned upon the foot that kicked him, and rendered unto his lord and master implicit and invariable obedience. The Siwash, his former owner, had trained him to retrieve, and of this Tom took shameless advantage. He would throw his hat or a glove or a stick into the middle of a rapid, and the gallant Dennis would dash into the swirling waters, regardless of colliding logs, fanged rocks, or spiky stumps. One day the dog got caught. Tom, with an oath, leapt on to the nearest log, from that to another and another till he reached the poor beast, whom he released with incredible skill and audacity, returning as he had come, followed by the dog. The boys yelled their appreciation of this astounding feat. Jimmy Doolan asked—

" What in thunder made ye do that, Tom ? "

Tom scowled.

" I dunno," he answered. " Dennis Brown knows that I think the world of that cur."

Within a fortnight, by an admittedly amazing coincidence, Dennis, the man, was caught in a precisely similar fashion. As a "river-driver" Dennis was beginning to "catch on." But he had not yet learned what he could or could not do. River-drivers wear immense boots, heavily spiked. Dennis upon this occasion had been sent with a crew to what is technically called "sweep the river" after a regular drive. Such logs as have wandered ashore, or been hung up in back eddies, are collected and sent on to join the others. This is hard work, but exciting, and not without its humours. Certain obstinate logs have to be coaxed down the river. It would almost seem as if they knew the fate that awaited them in the saw-pits, and in every fibre of their being exercised an instinct for self-preservation. For instance, a log may refuse to pass a certain rock in the river which has offered no obstruction whatever to other logs. Then the lumberman, armed with his long pole, with its spike to push and its sharp hook to pull, must reach that rock and pull and prod the recalcitrant traveller on his appointed way.

Dennis, in attempting this, had slipped upon the rock, and his heavy boot had been caught and held between the log and the rock. Below was a boiling rapid; above the river swirled in a heavy, oily mass. Dennis, to save his life, held tight on to the rock. He was in the position of the drunken Scot who dared not abandon his grip of the rail of the refreshment bar, because if he let go he would fall down, and if he did not let go he must miss his train. Dennis held on with both hands. If he endeavoured to unfasten his boot, he would be swept into the rapid; if he did not let go, and none came to his rescue, the log would grind his leg to powder.

Tom happened to see him and plunged into the river. Dennis had crawled on to the rock from the other side, a feat easily achievable. Tom might have gone round; any other man in the camp would have done so. The odds were slightly against his reaching the rock, for the river was running like a mill-race.

Five minutes later both men, dripping wet, were safely ashore, and the log was careering down stream!

"Ye've saved my life," gasped Dennis.

"Never seen such a blamed fool as you in all my days," replied Tom, as he stared savagely into Dennis's mild blue eyes. "You'd hurt yerself rockin' a baby's cradle, you would. 'Bout time you quit men's work, ain't it?"

"Not yet," said Dennis.

During these weeks upon the river Dennis had not seen anything of Mamie. Tom Barker, as supreme boss, visited all crews, and then returned to his wife, with either a leer or a frown upon his face. She had come to loathe the leer more than the frown. In the different camps the boys told the same story—

"He knocks the stuffin' out of her!"

The stay-at-home Briton, warm with roast beef and indigestion, will wonder that one man amongst a hundred should be suffered to ill-treat a thin, dough-faced little woman. Why did they not arise and slaughter him? Had Tom stolen a colt in the cattle-country he would have been lynched. Let publicists resolve the problem!

Finally, one Sunday morning, Dennis and Mamie met again.

"Holy Mackinaw!" exclaimed Dennis.

"Anything wrong?"

"Everything."

"I don't understand." But, of course, she did.

"It's God's truth, then, what the boys say?"

She hung her head.

"I thought he'd quit when I went up the river," said Dennis. "Say, let's you an' me skin out o' this. I'll get my dough to-night."

"Oh, Dennis!" she murmured, in piteous protestation, "we'd burn in eternal torment."

"We'd burn together," said Dennis. "Anyways, if this ain't torment, and if Barker ain't Beelzebub himself, I'm a liar."

She shook her head, with the tears streaming down her thin, white cheeks.

"Gee!" said Dennis, reduced to silence.

"I tuk him for better and worse," sobbed Mamie.

"You might ha' guessed that it would be worse," growled Dennis. Then, desperately, he blurted out, "Because you're dead-set on keepin' the seventh commandment, you're jest naterally drivin' me to break the sixth."

"What?"

"I've said it. And he saved my life, too. But when I look at yer, I get to thinking." His voice sank to a hoarse whisper. "I think lots, nights. He comes back to ye alone, through them trees, and there's one place where the pine needles is thick as moss. And I mind me what a Dago told me onst. He'd killed his man, he had, stabbed him from behind with a knife he showed me: jest an ordinary knife, only sharp. An' he told me how he done it, whar to strike—savvy? It goes in slick!"

He stopped, seeing that Mamie was regarding him with wide-eyed horror and consternation.

"Dennis!"

"Yes, my name's Dennis, right enough. That's the trouble. I hav'n't the nerve to kill Barker, and you hav'n't the nerve to skip off with me. We're two of a kind, Mamie, scairt to death of what comes after death. And you know it. So long!"

She caught at his arm.

"You ain't a-goin' to leave the inlet?"

"It's a mighty big country, this," Dennis replied austerely; "but I've a notion it ain't quite big enough for Barker an' me. So long!"

"I'm comin' up to-morrer, Dennis, to see 'em run the last rapid. Mebbe you was fullish to leave the range?"

He marked the interrogation in her tone, and answered, for him, almost roughly—

"Mebbe I was, but not so fullish as you by a long sight!"

With that he returned to the bunk-house.

. . . .

Not half a mile from the inlet the Coho gathers itself together for its last wild rush to salt water. And here there is a huge pool where logs lie peacefully as alligators in the sun. At the end of the pool the river flows gently in a channel free from rocks and snags. Then the channel narrows, and a little farther on you behold the head of the rapid, and half-way down the Coho Falls thunder everlastingly. When the logs reach the falls they are meat for the mills. Nothing can stop them then. One after another they rise on end to take the final plunge. Some twist and writhe as if in agony, as if conscious that the river and forest shall know them no more. Thousands have travelled the self-same way; not one has ever returned. The lower rapid of the Coho hardly deserves its name. Half a mile farther on it is an estuary across which stretches the boom.

The crews assembled on each side of the pool. The logs were pricked into slow movement. This being duffers' work was assigned to the less experienced. The picked river-drivers stood upon the rocks of the upper rapid, pole in hand. And here, watching them with a lack-lustre eye, stood Mamie in the shade of a dogwood tree in full blossom. Now and again a soft white petal would fall upon the water and be swept away. Above the hemlocks soughed softly. At her feet the giant maidenhair raised its delicate fronds till they touched her cheek.

She watched the logs go by in a never-ending procession. The scene fascinated her, although, in a sense, she was singularly devoid of either imagination or perception. Movement beguiled a woman whose own life had been stagnant for five-and-twenty years. Deep down in her heart was the unformulated but inevitable conviction that the logs were moving and that she was standing still. Tom loomed large in the immediate foreground. He, too, moved so swiftly that his huge form lacked definition. She saw him snatch a pole from one of the men and stab viciously at a log which refused to budge ; and every time that his arm rose and fell a little shudder trickled down her spinal column. The log seemed to receive the blows apathetically. A bad jam was imminent. She could hear Tom swearing, and the other logs floating on and on seemed to hear him also, and tremble. His bull's voice rose loud above the roar of the falls. Mamie looked down. At her feet crouched Dennis, the dog, and he also was trembling at those raucous sounds, and Mamie could feel his thin ribs pressing against her own thin legs.

At that moment light came to her obscure mind. She was like the log. She refused to budge, funked the plunge, submitting to unending blows, and words which were almost worse than blows. And by her obstinacy and apathy she was driving the best man on God's earth to premeditated murder.

That morning, let us remember, Tom had beaten the dog, and because she had interfered with a pitiful protest her husband had struck her close to the temple. Ever since this blow she had heard the roar of the falls with increasing intensity.

" Why don't it move ? " she asked herself.

As she put the question the log did move, borne away by the full current. Mamie, followed by the dog, ran after it, with her eyes aflame with excitement. Dennis barked, divining something uncanny, eager to distract the mind of his mistress from what seemed to be engrossing it. Still she ran on, with her eyes upon the log. The dog knew that she must stop in a moment, that no one could pass the falls unless they went over them. Did he divine also that she meant to go over them—that at last, with her poor, imperfect vision, she had seen that way out of captivity?

She reached the point where farther advance was impossible. To her right rose a solid wall of stone; opposite rose its twin; between the two the river rushed tumultuously, tossing the great logs hither and thither as if they were spilikins.

Mamie watched her own log. After its goadings it kept a truer course than most of its fellows. But she had outstripped it. Standing upon the edge of the precipice, feeling the cold spray upon her face, hearing the maddening roar of the monster below, less to be feared than that other monster from whom she realised that she had escaped, she waited for the final plunge. . . .

What was passing in her mind at this supreme moment? We may well believe that she saw clearly the past through the mists which obscured the future. Always she had been a log at the mercy of a drunken father. Her mother had died in giving birth to her, but she knew vaguely that this mother was a Church member. She did not know—and, knowing, could never have understood—that from her she had inherited a conscience—or shall we call it an ineradicable instinct?—which constrained her to turn aside, shuddering, from certain temptations, to obey, without reasoning, certain ethical laws, solemnly expounded to her by a Calvinistic grandmother.

But Nature had been too much for her. Even as she had turned instinctively and with horror from the breaking of a commandment, so also she had selected the mate who possessed in excess the physical qualities so conspicuously lacking in her. She had fallen a victim, and a reluctant victim, to the law of compensation. When Tom Barker held up his finger and whistled, she crawled to him.

The log, slightly rolling, as if intoxicated, neared the brink of the falls. And then it stopped again, where the river was narrowest and the current strongest. No log had stopped in this place before; Mamie saw that it was caught by a small rock, and held fast by the other logs behind it.

" It won't go over," she murmured.

Within a minute a terrific jam impended. Across the river Tom was swearing horribly; and between husband and wife rose a filmy cloud of spray upon which were imprinted the mysterious colours of the rainbow, which, long ago, Mamie had been taught to regard as the most wonderful symbol in the world—God's promise that in the end good should triumph over evil.

Afraid to move, fascinated, she stood still, staring at the rainbow.

Presently Tom disappeared. When he returned Mamie could see him very plainly. He had a stick of dynamite and a fuse. Mamie saw him glance at his watch and measure the fuse. Then, leaping from log to log, he approached the one in midstream which lay passive, blocking the advance of all the others. With splendid skill and daring he adjusted the dynamite upon the small rock which held the log, and lit the fuse. He returned as he had come, and Mamie could hear the cheers of the men upon the opposite bank.

" It'll hev to go now," she reflected.

At this moment Dennis, the dog, must have realised that his master had left something behind on the rock. Mamie saw him spring from log to log, and then, holding the dynamite between his teeth, with the spluttering fuse still attached, follow his master.

" Tom ! " she screamed. " Look out ! "

Tom turned and saw ! And the others—Dennis Brown, Mamie, the river-drivers—saw also and trembled. Tom began to curse the dog, adjuring him to go back, to drop it, *drop IT*, DROP IT !

But the faithful creature, who had risked life to retrieve sticks thrown into fierce rapids, ran steadily on. Mamie saw the face of her husband crumble into an expression of hideous terror and palsy. His lips mouthed inarticulately, with his huge hands he tried to push back the monstrous fate that was overtaking him.

The dog laid the dynamite at his master's feet at the moment when it exploded.

. . . .

And the man whose name was Dennis knew that his turn had come at last.

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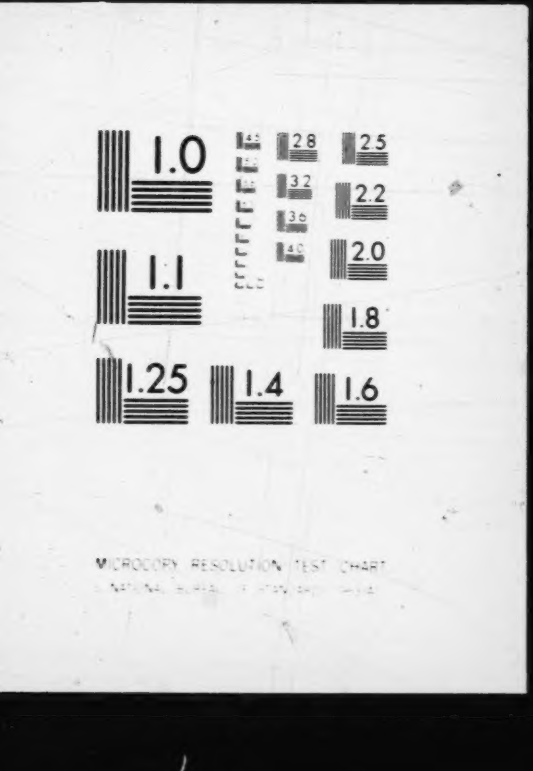
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